

Apparently it's My Fault That My Husband Has The Head of a Beast:

Eri Shiduki

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Apparently it's
MY FAULT
That My Husband Has
**THE HEAD
OF A BEAST**





CLAUDIO BALZAR

Crown Prince of Baltzar. To Rosemarie he looks like a dashing, black-haired young man, but to everyone else—himself included—his head looks like a goat-horned Silver Lion. He is also a skilled soldier, specializing in swordplay, and hates showing his vulnerabilities to others.

ROSEMARIE VOLLAND

Princess of the nation of Volland. She possesses eyes that curse her with seeing any liars or those with negative emotions as having the heads of beasts. Because of that, she has trust issues and a weak character, leading to her currently living as a shut-in in the royal palace. Gardening is her favorite pastime, and she often gives names to her gardening tools and plants.

She loves drinking tea made from Kaola seeds.

Apparently it's
MY FAULT
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characters



HEIDI SCHNEIDT

Rosemarie's maid, possessed of a pure and innocent personality. Positively worships Rosemarie.



ACTO CLAUSEN

Claudio's aide and Vice Captain of the Imperial Guard. A serious yet pleasant young man.



FRITZ BELL

Clergyman of the state church. Behind the scenes, he is a spy that works in the shadows for Claudio.



EDESTRAUID

The best sorcerer in Baltzar. Lazy by nature and has a penchant for saying, "Such a slog."

KASTNER

Archbishop of the state church of Baltzar.
A middle-aged man with a mild-mannered face.

TERMS

BALTZAR

Magical superpower nation located in the north of the continent. Reveres a mythical creature with the head of Silver Lion and the horns of a goat as a divine beast.

VOLLAND

Small nation some distance away from the superpower that is Baltzar. Livestock and agriculture are its main industries.

KAOLA

In Volland, where it is produced, Kaola seeds are roasted and consumed as a luxury item. Carrying it into foreign countries is banned.

THE SEED OF MANA-SEALING

A seed that restrains mana, overseen by Baltzar's state church. Works by being introduced directly into the body.

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Prologue

She had never seen a person like that before.

“Why...?” Standing in the corner of a decadent hall housing a slew of people dressed to the nines, Rosemarie had her eyes locked on and fixed to a single point. A single young man, to be exact.

The young man had sharp features complemented by a head of sleek, shiny black hair. He’d been smiling amicably as he conversed with the guests, but she could see that he looked a tad pale in the face.

“...Heidi.” Her voice cracked as she called to her maid standing just behind her. Her heart was pounding like mad. The sound of it drove her up the wall. She placed her hand upon her chest for composure.

“Yes, my princess. Might I offer you some water? Please, help yourself.”

“Huh? Ah, yes, thank you. Um, but...”

“Oh, do you feel faint? I have come readily prepared with smelling salts if need be. Or, perhaps you feel nauseous? Please, do not go anywhere. I will go fetch a bucket and...”

“No, those aren’t the issues I’m facing here...” Without an ounce of panic, her maid attempted to tend to her needs, but Rosemarie stopped her before things got into full swing. She tightened her hand around the glass of water she’d been given.

“I... I will be that man’s wife.” Not even noticing that her maid’s mouth was open wide in a dumbfounded and shameless display, Rosemarie made her way straight toward the young man. Her legs trembled in nervousness.

“P-Princess, as much as I would love to see you walk the aisle as a bride-to-be, are you truly—and I mean *truly*—set on that individual over there?” Her maid asked with extra added emphasis in an oddly flustered, yet hushed, tone. Rosemarie kept front and center, squeezing the glass in her hand even harder.

“Yes... he is the one. I don’t think I can settle with anyone but him.” She was doing it to have claim of peace of mind.

Besides, she would eventually need to marry for the sake of her land. In which case, that black-haired crown prince would be the one to take her hand in marriage.

She had never wanted anything as badly as this in her entire life.

“And, after all, he is the first one that doesn’t look like one of

those.” Her soft murmur was probably too low for her maid to hear. She could hear the chatterings of disapproval still going on behind her, but that did not stop her stride.

Publicly, this evening gala was to celebrate the birthday of the crown prince of Baltzar, a magical regional superpower. But in actual fact, it was to select a bride for him. She’d reluctantly agreed to attend after receiving an order not so subtly disguised as a party invitation. But she’d never have expected that same event to cause her to lose so much of her composure.

Yes, she was positively enthralled. So much so, in fact, that she hadn’t even noticed that there were barely any girls approaching the crown prince for some inexplicable reason.

—Claudio, the Crown Prince of the Magical Nation of Baltzar, boasted the greatest mana of anyone inside and outside of the country. He was famed for his accomplishments as a warrior, as well. If one were to bring up a demerit in regards to him, it would be that his face is so terrifying that one look at it would be enough to haunt your memories.

The unsettling rumors that she had once heard from Heidi before she entered Baltzar had fallen right out of her head.

(*I need* to be that man’s wife... I shudder to think of anyone else.) She remembered all too well the day that her father, king of his own realm, had ordered her to go to Baltzar.

Back then and even now, she was so afraid of people that she found herself helpless—so much so that she hid herself in her secret little garden.

Chapter 1: The Shut-In Princess Goes to an Evening Gala

Ding, ding. The muffled chime of the midday bells echoing in the distance caused Rosemarie to open her eyes. However, all that surrounded her was darkness—so dark, in fact, that it would make no difference whether her eyes were open or shut.

(I fell asleep...)

As she counted the chimes of the still-echoing bells, she groggily arose from the patch of shrubbery where she had lain, the sweet yet bitter aroma of greenery greeting her nose. The scent was relaxing, and she breathed it in deeply. At nine strokes of the bell, she sensed someone nearby. She tensed all over.

Who could it have been? Aside from herself, only her family and a handful of other people were allowed entry into this royal villa's garden.

"...Come now, Princess! Lady Rosemarie, where are you?" The familiar voice of her maid reached Rosemarie's ears. She poked her hand out of her shrub concealment and waved slowly.

"Heidi, over here." The footsteps treading on the grass drew closer; at the same time, the darkness cast over Rosemarie's field of vision dispersed in an instant. The dazzling sunlight made her shut her eyes instinctively. The warm, gentle spring breeze calmly whisked past her cheeks.

"...Grk! My eyes, they burn..."

"They do not, milady. There you go, putting that bucket over your head again... I implore you to at least shroud yourself in a veil instead, please. Heavens be, look at these marks left on you." Rosemarie looked on with dissatisfaction as the green-eyed maid stroked the girl's cheek with her fingertips, brow furrowed.

"It's not just some bucket. It carries water, soil, and grass, in addition to being sturdy enough to use as a footstool. Not only that, but if I put it over my head, it helps protect me from the sunlight and the prying eyes of strangers. So I'll have you know it's quite the multipurpose tool."

"Well, I have never seen another person utilize it as headgear even once before... But, that is beside the point. Have you been off gardening yet again? You have dirt all over your dress. —Did something in this garden transpire that was bad enough to require placing a bucket over your head?" Heidi said, sighing in

disappointment. Rosemarie took the bucket with the light-green ribbon back into her waiting arms and clutched it carefully to her chest. Her shoulders bobbed up and down with a twitch. She looked around her hastily, her eyes finally alighting upon the splendid violet growing just next to her.

“N-No, that’s not what’s going on. Right, Therese?”

“...While I understand that you are fond of horticulture, I would appreciate it if you would not name your violets and ask them to agree with you, milady... So, might I ask, did something happen?”

“...”

“Princess...?”

“Um, well, you see, I wouldn’t say something bad *has* happened... maybe that it *will* happen...?”

Based on appearances alone, she looked sweet as a piece of candy, with soft, flowing blonde hair. But Heidi’s expression, and her sharp eyes fixed on Rosemarie, made it abundantly clear that the young girl couldn’t weasel her way out of this with excuses. Rosemarie slumped her shoulders in defeat.

“Father, you see...”

“His Majesty has been summoning you, has he not? Ever since yesterday, might I add.” She had the words taken right from her mouth, causing her to stare in amazement while nodding her head.

“But how did you know? The court lady delivered that letter when you weren’t even around.” Yesterday, while Heidi was away from her side, a court lady brought a letter, saying it was from her father in the main court. While it did instruct her to come to his royal office, no time or date was specified. She exploited this point, as she had no desire to go, choosing instead to distress more and more over the matter.

Her father, the King of Volland, sending her a letter was a rare occurrence.

That alone was enough to make her worried that there might be some sort of issue. But seeing as how he wasn’t sending a flood of requests for her presence, she figured that it probably wasn’t an emergency.

While Volland was by no means a poor country, it didn’t have any major industries to speak of, either. It was a small country mainly focused around livestock and agriculture. Apparently, even the aristocrats lived a more reserved lifestyle than those of other lands.

Partly due to the citizens’ religious devotion and dislike for outsiders, interaction with other nations was kept to a bare minimum. And sorcerers, accepted in other nations, were reviled here—not enough to be persecuted, but reviled nonetheless.

It wasn’t that she didn’t want to see her father. She already didn’t

get to see him often, since he was so busy with his official duties. What she hated was the path to get there.

"I managed to see His Majesty's court lady while searching for you. Oh, she was quite mad, asking how long you intended on making His Majesty wait, so this may have repercussions to my salary," Heidi stated frankly, smiling. Rosemarie's face went pale, and she rose to her feet.

"I will go! I will go right now, I swear!" It didn't help matters that she was always causing issues for Heidi due to her rather troublesome physical constitution. She knew that she shouldn't be making things any more difficult.

"In that case, let us change those clothes, shall we?" urged Heidi, as they returned from the garden to Rosemarie's room, and she assisted the girl in changing her outfit.

"... I wonder if Father is angry with me." The court lady had voiced her own anger, but Rosemarie didn't think her father would be in the same mood. Even so, she murmured that thought to herself nervously. As she did, Heidi, who had been adjusting Rosemarie's outfit, smiled softly at her.

"He is patiently awaiting your arrival, knowing full well this is always the case. It will be just fine. I know His Majesty, your family, and you, princess, all too well, after all."

"Yes, and I am aware of that myself... but..."

"Oh, my, are you having trouble believing me? Lies and I do not mix, milady. See here, is this the face of a liar?" Rosemarie stared at Heidi, who beamed back. Her charming face with freckles from her cheeks to her nose didn't look an iota out of the ordinary. The girl sighed in relief unconsciously.

"No, it isn't. I'm sorry for doubting you."

"Heaven forbid, I absolutely adore that forthright side of you, milady. —That being said, might we do away with the whole bucket headdress?"

Rosemarie was just about to pick up the bucket placed on the floor, but instead let her brows fall in a worried manner.

"N-No?"

"Absolutely not. You aren't being told to show up to an evening gala or an official ceremony. We will reach the royal office in the main court in the blink of an eye." Heidi swiftly confiscated the bucket, making Rosemarie lower her eyebrows in disappointment.

"I hope there is no one else walking out there... Maybe if I go after sunset, or something..." Rosemarie's murmurs, however, fell on deaf ears as she was dragged out of her villa chambers while still mentally unprepared.

She wanted to go back to her room.

Not even a few moments had passed since she left the villa, and Rosemarie was already whining.

The main court was accessible by passing through a few courtyards. The courtyard gardens were the mingling areas for aristocrats, but seeing as how there were no public events scheduled for today, there were barely any people out enjoying a stroll.

That should have been the case, at least. So that left her to wonder why there was a young miss before her eyes, blocking her way with a winning smile drawn across her face.

Her modest wish of getting through this without seeing anyone else had sadly gone unfulfilled.

Unnerved by the girl's strong, confident stare—the sort that marked her as a high-ranking aristocrat—Rosemarie's eyes fell upon the girl's crimson-painted lips.

Oh, how she longed for her bucket.

“Good day to you, Lady Rosemarie. It has been far too long since we've last met.”

“...Q-Quite.” Rosemarie didn't remember her, so maybe it was far too long. Seeing as how she barely showed up to any of those evening galas, she had no idea who this young miss was or where she was from.

“I have not seen you for quite some time now, so I was very concerned that you were unwell.” The young miss said, showing her consideration for her well-being. However, the look in her eyes had a hint of scorn in them.

(Ah, she's changing.) Just as an ill feeling made her shoulders jolt, it happened. Those crimson lips started to warp like rubber.

“—!!” Rosemarie stood there breathless as, right before her very eyes, huge splits formed on the sides of the young miss's mouth. Her soft, clay-like skin began sprouting black and pale-yellow fur in an instant.

Her abundance of well-maintained hair disappeared off her scalp, and her ears shifted their way up to an inhuman height atop her head. The set of pearly-white teeth in her mouth changed into a set so sharp they could rip apart flesh with ease. Her once beautiful human female face was slowly but surely changing form into something more grotesque, which made Rosemarie tremble uncontrollably.

“It's the perfect hour to see the roses in the east garden. Would you care to accompany me there, Lady Rosemarie? Your health will suffer if you stay cooped up in the royal villa all the time.” Despite using that wide tongue peeking through that huge, slitted mouth, her

voice still rang like a bell in a fashion no different from a few moments ago. The surreal mismatch sent jolts of fear through Rosemarie's body.

The young miss's maid stood there behind her, not shocked at all by what was transpiring. Not even Heidi, who was supposed to move into action if she felt something was amiss, was raising her voice in alarm. That also went for the knights guarding the courtyard from afar. None of them was up in arms at the abnormal goings-on in the bright, cheery garden.

(Aah... So I really am the only one who can see it.) She was finding it hard to breathe. Rosemarie gripped her skirt and lowered her head, attempting to keep her fingers from trembling so. The young miss poked her head into Rosemarie's line of vision—most likely suspicious of her abnormal behavior.

"Lady Rosemarie?"

"Eee...!" What jumped in front of her eyes was the face of a carnivorous feline beast. Rosemarie stifled her shriek and backed away at the sight of this grotesque form—the face of a leopard, but the body of a human girl rife with radiant youth from the neck down.

"Whatever is the matter, milady? You look a trifle pal—"

"S-Stay back! Even should you eat me, I am in no way appetizing!" Gripped with the fear of possibly getting snacked on by those sharp fangs, Rosemarie let those words slip from her mouth as a knee-jerk reaction. It wasn't until she pushed away the nervous young miss that she started to come back to her senses. The young miss ended up on her rear end, and proceeded to look up in a flabbergasted daze. Her face was back in order—skin as smooth as silk and beautiful.

She had really done it now. The color drained from Rosemarie's face.

"I'm, uh, oh, sorry..." Rosemarie apologized in a whimpering tone, leaving the still dumbfounded young miss behind and making a break for the main court.

(I-I did it again... Aah, even more bad rumors are going to get spread...)

The crown princess was an eccentric shut-in; she would sometimes make appearances, but made for lousy conversation—she knew that all of those rumors were in circulation.

Once she was in the main hall and the young miss was completely out of view, Rosemarie squatted where she stood like her legs had given out on her.

"Princess! Are you all right?"

"Yes, I managed to survive..." She pressed a hand to her chest to calm her still racing heart. Heidi took to her knees and stroked her back gently, prompting Rosemarie to gradually regain her lost

composure.

“Today they looked like leopards...”

“I figured that was the case. Hmm, well, it is common for animosity to lie dormant behind social pleasantries, after all. Is there nothing that can be done about it? How strange, that those who house negative emotions should appear to you to have the heads of beasts.” Heidi said with a troubled smile. Rosemarie then looked back at Heidi, tears welling up in her eyes now that she was safe from what she so feared.

“This is why I didn’t want to go outside...” The head of any person who harbors jealousy, anger, or any other negative emotions would look like that of a beast to her. Regardless who it may have been—even if it was a member of her family who loved and cared for her, or her trusted maid companion.

She didn’t remember exactly when they started looking like that to her.

However, she did know that she reacted far worse back in her childhood than she did now.

Believe it or not, she had actually gotten better about it. In her youth, it was so bad that she was too afraid to even stand in the presence of other people. When forced to be near them, she would cry loudly and start having convulsions. It was such a serious condition that her parents, concerned for their daughter’s well-being after seeing her highly emotional state, allowed her to live in the royal villa, and limited access to a select few.

Her parents had their suspicions that perhaps she was under the influence of some kind of spell. They even called for a sorcerer, despite Volland’s stance on them, to check her. Even so, they still couldn’t identify the cause.

Depending on who you asked, they might have thought that being able to tell if someone was harboring any animosity was actually quite a handy skill.

Nevertheless, no matter how many times she viewed the grotesque sight of a person with a regular face morphing into something else right before her very eyes, it would still cause her crippling fear. Simply put, it was because it could be construed as the animosity in these people’s heart manifesting visibly. Their faces would be all smiles, yet they silently scoff at you on the inside. That disparity was terrifying.

“Heidi...”

“No.”

“But, I haven’t said anything yet.”

“I can tell even without you doing so. You are going to say that you wish to return to your room, correct? That is a firm ‘no.’ Also, no,

you may not put on your bucket. You see? The royal office is just a hop, skip, and jump away, so just try to keep yourself together, milady. Once your meeting with His Majesty is over, I shall brew up a nice steaming pot of your favorite Kaola tea.”

Upon hearing the word “Kaola,” Rosemarie’s sunken mood started to surface ever so slightly. Even she had to admit that it was pretty childish of her, but how could one resist indulging in one of their favorite things?

Rosemarie was finally to her feet, and with her favorite drink conjured in her mind, she resumed walking once more with a heavy gait.

“C-Could you please repeat that again?” Going through an emotional joyride with each passer-by’s face either looking or not looking like a beast, she somehow managed to make it to her father’s office. Inside, Rosemarie could be heard raising her voice in a shrill and nervous tone. The office had been cleared of people, so her voice reverberated so well that even she could recognize how shaken up she was over what she’d heard.

Rosemarie’s father gave his daughter a cheerful greeting, despite her having kept him waiting since yesterday; he wasn’t angry at her. His face was that of a good-natured and mature man. However, the news she heard from that very man’s mouth seemed impossible.

“An invitation to an evening gala arrived from Baltzar addressed to you.” Her eyes were fixed upon her father. He repeated the news in a deep tone, his forehead furrowed. Despite hearing it again, her thoughts just weren’t catching up with her.

Baltzar was the country to the north, about two countries over from Volland. They’d been on the cutting edge of technology and civilization, far outstripping neighboring countries. They also boasted a large population of sorcerers, and had for some time now.

Seeing as the entire royal family possessed mana, and they had a literal wizard army, one might think they were feared by the surrounding nations. On the contrary, they served an integral role as mediator for international disputes. Peace was assured for any nation under their jurisdiction. On the other hand, making an enemy of them would be a grave error.

From the perspective of the tiny nation of Volland, whose main industries include agriculture and livestock, they were a force second to none on a precipice all their own. “An invitation...? For me? From Baltzar... —?!”

“Yes, from Baltzar.”

“I couldn’t! I cannot go! I am sure you realize how long it took me

just to get to the royal offi—”

“I had that letter delivered to you yesterday morning, so about a day and some change. Though I must say, it’s a vast improvement over the three days it used to take you,” Rosemarie’s father said, laughing things off with a hearty chuckle. But Rosemarie shook her head violently, pale in the face.

What transpired earlier was an everyday occurrence in her life. She would positively collapse with shock and fear before she even reached Baltzar. No, if she wasn’t careful, death awaited her.

“This is no laughing matter. Are you sure that, um, well, they only want me? They are not asking for you, Elder Sister Diana, or Charlotte?” Rosemarie had an elder and younger sister, but out of the three, the only one who proved to still be a handful was Rosemarie herself. So if anybody were to represent their father, it surely would have been her elder sister. In fact, her sister had gone to foreign lands as their father’s representative several times now, which made the request for Rosemarie by name all the more odd. Her father placed his hand upon his forehead, letting out a deep sigh. He seemed extremely exhausted as he voiced his concerns.

“Apparently, these invitations have been sent to all princesses and maidens of neighboring nations who are unattached and similar in age to the nineteen-year old crown prince of their land. And, while this evening gala is being held by the King of Baltzar, the blatant pretense for the event is to celebrate the crown prince’s birthday. In other words, the star of the party is the crown prince—Prince Claudio.”

As Rosemarie tilted her head in doubt, her father suddenly leaned himself forward in his seat, filling her with extreme apprehension.

“This evening gala is a front for selecting Prince Claudio’s bride. Obviously I wouldn’t be extended an invitation. Diana is engaged, and Charlotte is barely ten years old. So, given the facts, where does that leave you?”

“...I’m not engaged, and I turned sixteen this spring.”

“Yes, you see my point, then. You have been extended an invitation because you are in the running to be his bride.”

Rosemarie clutched her head with both hands. They must have been willing to go the extra mile to get a wide variety of girls if they were reaching out to nations as small as theirs.

“But why is the literal crown prince of Baltzar not already engaged in the first place?!”

“...You’re unaware of the rumors about Prince Claudio, aren’t you?”

“I’m unaware, and I don’t wish to be aware, for that matter.” She looked at her father reproachfully as he raised an eyebrow in surprise. She already knew firsthand how unreliable rumors were. She’d heard

many people spoken of favorably, only to find herself locking eyes with a beast head when she met them face-to-face.

“That fact aside, I-I’m assuming... that there is no option to decline, correct?” If she were to turn down a request from a superpower like Baltzar, Volland would be squashed flat like a flea in no time.

Besides, there were only a handful of people outside of her own family who knew of her unique way of seeing the world. The majority of people knew of her simply as an eccentric shut-in princess with a slightly weak constitution. Rejecting an invitation from Baltzar would have undoubtedly caused an outcry among the retainers.

“I’m afraid there’s not. Sending you out of the country... no, out of this castle is cause for extreme worry and concern. But as long as you are at least seen in attendance at the gala, I see no harm in you excusing yourself as soon as it gets underway.” Her father’s distressed expression made it clear: he wasn’t just feeding her lines. He really was concerned for her well-being. That put her a tiny bit at ease.

“Well, it is a country you’ve been to once before. I suppose it’s a trifle better than any other country, in that regard.”

“—Huh? Um, but I’ve never been to Baltzar before...”

“What are you saying, my child? We’ve taken you there. You came along with us to Baltzar’s National Foundation Day when you were a child. Diana also accompanied us, wanting to show you an outside land at least once in your life. Admittedly, you didn’t see Prince Claudio back then.”

She has absolutely no recollection of this. However, even if she did, it wouldn’t have altered the current situation. She had no choice but to go—to prevent any trouble befalling her country or her family.

“...Okay, I understand. I will try my best, even if it kills me.”

“Splendid. Upon your return, I will reward you with as much Kaola as you wish.” Rosemarie’s father patted her on the head like a little child, prompting a smile that sought to cover the fear and anxiety swelling in her heart.

Rosemarie tugged the shawl she wore over her light dress closer around her as a refreshing breeze brushed against her cheek.

Volland was in the height of spring, but it was still only early in the season in the more northern Baltzar.

The castle of Baltzar, which her father said she’d visited when she was a child, appeared to be a sturdy, stone-constructed stronghold from the outside. But the interior was breathtaking, coated in stucco with numerous intricate carvings installed. She felt as though she somewhat remembered seeing this before, but she couldn’t remember

exactly.

She'd been in a state of nervous fear from the moment she'd heard of her trip to the moment she arrived. Thus, she had barely any recollection of her journey there. However, she definitely remembered that Heidi, who accompanied her as her personal maid, had been offering moral support the entire time.

"Are you cold, milady?" Heidi asked with concern from her post beside Rosemarie. In response, the girl turned and smiled stiffly.

"Oh, no, I'm fine. W-We're about to head into the hall, anyway..." Rosemarie had been hiding in the shadows of a pillar in the cold corridor, timidly staking out the hall that was most likely filled to the brim with guests.

(I-I don't want to go in there...)

Judging from the hustle and bustle, there were probably quite a few people attending this gala event. Baltzar's own aristocrats would be there, of course, in addition to guests from neighboring nations, as her father had mentioned.

Those were all the people gathered here. With all sorts of expectations jumbled together, there was not a doubt in her mind that she—and only she—was about to be treated to a bizarre and terrifying menagerie of humans mingling with beasts. She had attended several evening galas in Volland before, but it was a sight that she still wished to behold as little as humanly possible.

Occasionally someone would raise an eyebrow at Rosemarie clinging to her pillar as they passed into the hall. But she did her best to avoid eye contact.

"Princess, it's about that time..." Heidi said, her voice holding a hint of impatience. Rosemarie realized that the time for the gala to get underway was at her doorstep. Her plan was to enter the hall near the very tail end, then get out of there as fast as her feet could take her.

"Let's give it your best, Princess. You're so close to the finish line. You're oh so close."

"...I want to just turn into a pillar."

"And how do you expect to get home if you're a pillar? Come, now, let's make our way in."

At Heidi's urging, Rosemarie walked with a heavy gait into the grand hall. The warm air wrapped around her body, but it was anything but relaxing. Her forehead broke out in a nervous sweat.

(It's fine, it's fine, no one is coming near me...)

Rosemarie had no desire to stand out in a crowd, but Heidi and her family were reluctant to let her go to a gala underdressed. But she begged and pleaded until they relented, allowing her to wear a simple, dark green dress. According to her younger sister, dresses with a wide-open neckline were what was in fashion. But knowing that to be out

of the question, she went with a regular design with a full collar instead.

She couldn't imagine anyone would be caught dead coming to speak to a drab country bumpkin of a princess.

As she proceeded into the hall on shaky legs, she could overhear the conversations of people here and there.

"Aah, that is a splendid suggestion. I would love to implement that in our own region right away." The gentleman nodding his head, completely enamored, was a bear.

"My, that is quite the fetching dress. Wherever did you have it made? You simply *must* introduce me to your seamstress!" The madame enviously singing high praise was a fox.

"Why, the other day, his son..."

"My daughter has quite the pleasant disposition..."

She found herself passing by horses, cats, goats... ladies and gentlemen with the faces of all sorts of beasts engaged in genial conversation.

The bizarre sight was starting to make Rosemarie break out in a cold sweat. It then caused her to trip over her own feet and bump her shoulder into the gentleman that she was attempting to pass by.

"M-My apologies," she said, extending an apology in a frail tone. The human-faced gentleman smiled in response.

"Think nothing of it. You are not hurt, are you? Such an innocent and lovely individual as yourself getting hurt would simply break my heart." As the gentleman spoke, his face started to warp, his pupils moving to the side in a manner indicative of a mountain goat, the very animal his whole head soon morphed into. Containing her shivering hand, Rosemarie gave a haphazard response and quickly left the area.

(Why are there so many beast heads here? I just want to go back to my room in Volland...)

Almost on the verge of tears, she moved to one corner of the hall and placed her back against the wall. It was the very wall opposite to where the throne sat. There was little chance of her meeting anyone's gaze here. Even if she saw them from behind, even if they looked like a beast.

Even if she looked at them, they had a beast head. Even if they looked at her, they had a beast head. There were some human heads visible here and there, but that was few and far between. Jealousy, heartless rumors, envy, lies... all sorts of negative emotions warped human faces into those of beasts in Rosemarie's eyes.

(I feel sick, I'm scared...)

Their faces, words, and feelings were all mixed up, putting her on the verge of a mental breakdown.

“It would appear that Crown Prince Claudio has arrived.” Just as Rosemarie felt a wave of nausea overtaking her, Heidi spoke up from next to her. Rosemarie could sense the guests around her were standing up straight, so she forced the feeling down and raised her head so as not to appear rude.

(What...?)

There, standing near the throne, was someone clad in a set of black clothes—a human young man. She was able to make out his slick black hair and his almost sunlight-translucent white skin, but she was too far away from where she was standing to accurately make out his appearance. However, the backs of the heads of most of the people that were watching the young man—Claudio—were of different kinds of beasts.

“So, that is what they meant when they said he had a terrifying face...” Heidi murmured unthinkingly, which prompted Rosemarie to look at her in disbelief.

“You can see his face even though we’re so far away?”

“Huh? Oh, yes, I can make out his face, for the most part.”

Turning away from the dumbfounded Heidi, Rosemarie turned and strained her eyes.

(Yeah, I can’t make out anything...)

She was able to tell that he had a human face instead of a beast face, but she wasn’t able to make out the structure of his face.

Usually it was the opposite—now everyone around her was able to see, but she wasn’t. It made her wonder what kind of face he had on him.

Feeling as though she’d been left behind, Rosemarie continued to stare at Claudio, stimulated by an odd sense of obsession.

The King of Baltzar entered the hall, congratulations were said, and chatting and dancing commenced. While all of that was going on, Rosemarie could not take her eyes off of Claudio.

(Why... haven’t I seen a beast head out of him even once?)

Not when he was entertaining that random royal who came up to give their congratulations, not when he was dancing with that young miss with a clear beast head on her shoulders—Claudio’s head never once took the appearance of a beast.

It wasn’t like her eyes were cured. The proof of that being that when she cast her eyes elsewhere, the hall still housed the bloodcurdling sight of these people with their grotesque features. Yet, among them all, there was only one who stood out—Claudio. He was the only one whose face remained human the entire time.

(I have never seen a person like that.)

Overcome with disbelief, she squeezed her folded hands sitting near her lap tighter. Could this sense of exaltation welling up inside

her be... happiness?

Maybe it was simply because he was sociable, but Claudio was moving back and forth around the room striking up conversations—all the while, the girl was tracking him with her eyes. It wasn't until she got close enough to distinguish his face that she realized how powerful his features were. He'd been smiling amicably as he conversed with the guests, but she could see that he looked a tad pale in the face.

"...Heidi." Her voice cracked as she called to her maid standing just behind her. Her heart was pounding like mad. The sound of it drove her up the wall. She placed her hand upon her chest for composure.

"Yes, my princess. Might I offer you some water? Please, help yourself."

"Huh? Ah, yes, thank you. Um, but..."

"Oh, do you feel faint? I have come readily prepared with smelling salts if need be. Or, perhaps you feel nauseous? Please, do not go anywhere. I will go fetch a bucket and..."

"No, those aren't the issues I'm facing here..." Without an ounce of panic, her maid attempted to tend to her needs, but Rosemarie stopped her before things got into full swing. She tightened her hand around the glass of water she'd been given.

"I... I will be that man's wife." Not even noticing that her maid's mouth was open wide in a dumbfounded and shameless display, Rosemarie made her way straight toward the young man. Her legs trembled in nervousness.

"P-Princess, as much as I would love to see you walk the aisle as a bride-to-be, are you truly—and I mean *truly*—set on that individual over there?" Her maid asked with extra added emphasis in an oddly flustered, yet hushed, tone. Rosemarie kept front and center, squeezing the glass in her hand even harder.

"Yes... he is the one. I don't think I can settle with anyone but him." She was doing it to have claim of peace of mind.

Besides, she would eventually need to marry for the sake of her land. In which case, that black-haired crown prince would be the one to take her hand in marriage.

She had never wanted anything as badly as this in her entire life.

"And, after all, he is the first one that doesn't look like one of *those*." The fact that he didn't look like he had a beast head was bona fide proof, devoid of any falsehood. If she let this slip away, then she was certain that man would be gone forever.

Her soft murmur was probably too low for her maid to hear. She could hear the chatterings of disapproval still going on from behind her, but that did not stop her stride.

Claudio slowly turned around to face her, perhaps noticing someone was behind him. Even looking at him up close, it was clear that he looked far too pale. Could it be that he was feeling sick, or something to that effect?

Claudio scanned Rosemarie as she stood there, a mystified yet innocuous smile forming on his face.

“Who might you—”

“I am, um, you see...” she said, her voice cracking. Her nerves blocked her throat, keeping her words from coming out. Rosemarie stared straight at Claudio as he waited in gentlemanly fashion, pale face and all, for her to speak. She gulped, and then...

“Um, your condition is, well, um...”

“Pardon?”

“I-I think it would be best for you to get some rest!” Her pathetically shivering voice echoed through the chatter-filled hall.

Silence draped over the vicinity. The crown prince stared questioningly at Rosemarie.

Once Rosemarie had snapped back to her senses, she took a step back and hung her head.

(Wait... just a second... I... and I meant...)

What was she even saying? She completely skipped any kind of greeting or introduction.

Suspicious looks tore into her from all around. Every look was from the eyes of a different beast. Her breathing sped up, and she started to feel lightheaded. She panicked as she attempted to spin her words into something more coherent.

“Um, I saw that your face... looked very... um, pale...”

“Pale? Are you saying that you know how pale my face is?”

She was slightly confused at his doubtful tone. It wasn’t about “knowing,” per se; he was clearly pale, and in a bad way.

“Yes, I do... And, well, it looks as though you’re quite exhausted. You have... bags under your eyes...” Why was no one was telling him to rest despite him looking so clearly pale and haggard?

Her ears caught wind of the chatterings of pity seeping from the crowd watching the situation unfold, bewildering her.

(Could it be that they can’t see it? Why?)

Was she seeing something different from everyone else again? A sharp pain ran through her chest.

As if backing up her statement, Claudio suddenly laughed aloud.

“Is that so? Bags? I see. However, it appears to me you’re the one who is exhausted. You seem likely to topple at any moment. It would be best if you were to retire. Could someone... ah, yes, you.” Most likely noticing Heidi waiting in the wings right behind Rosemarie, Claudio placed his hand on her shoulder in attempt to urge her along

toward her. The very next instant, it happened.

“—Ngh!” His hand was hot as it touched her. The heat almost felt as though she was being scalded by hot water, making her shake Claudio’s hand away instinctively. The momentum caused her to drop the glass that she had been holding this entire time.

Along with sound of the shattering glass, the image of a forest beyond the sturdy castle of Baltzar suddenly popped into her mind. The scenery looked somewhat familiar to her.

(What was that just now...?) She looked up at Claudio with a dumbfounded gaze, clueless as to what had just happened. He stared intently, eyes wide, at the hand that Rosemarie had brushed aside. When he pulled his gaze over to her, for whatever reason, a wide smile formed on his face.

It wasn’t an innocuous smile like earlier, but a joyful, heartened smile. She was completely caught off guard.

“Um, I’m sorry... that was rude of me...” She slowly started to pull herself back, but Claudio took her hand respectfully, his cheeks tinged red. She put up her guard involuntarily, but she didn’t feel any of the heat from earlier. However, his blue eyes, half-open now thanks to his wide smile, took a sharp look at her down below. Seeing him with his lips in that smile made him as a whole look vaguely unsettling.

“You are not hurt, are you? It seems you are exhausted, just as I suspected. Allow me to send you to the waiting room. —Alto, see to her. I want you to escort her until I arrive later.”

“M’lord!” said a stalwart-looking knight, who was apparently Claudio’s aide, extending his services. She found no relief from the knight’s still human face, and instead timidly looked around her. That is when she spotted Heidi, jaw clenched and face pale for some reason. Looking at her expression slightly perplexed Rosemarie.

(Did I do something? All I did was brush away his hand... right? I mean, he doesn’t have a beast head and I’m pretty sure he isn’t angry at me... Also, why the escort?)

As Rosemarie stood there, still bewildered, Claudio passed off her hand to the knight.

“Ah, yes, how rude of me. I haven’t even asked you for your name.” Still without a clue, just as Rosemarie was about to start following the knight leading her away, she slowly turned around in response to suave voice from behind. She didn’t want to say it for some odd reason, but there was probably no point in trying to resist.

“...My name is Rosemarie Volland.”

Claudio appeared thoughtful for a moment. Then his smile grew broader.

“Lady Rosemarie... a fine name, indeed.”

Hearing him speak her name as if ruminating on it, then follow it

up with a compliment, caught Rosemarie by surprise. All she could do was stare back at Claudio in utter confusion.

Chapter 2: Matrimony Mired in Objections

On that day, extravagantly-dressed people gathered at Baltzar's Royal Chapel for the wedding ceremony of Crown Prince Claudio.

People dressed in multicolored outfits lined the pews like a human flower garden. On the upper stage, the Archbishop was reciting a passage from scripture in front of the sublime white altar that sat opposite the guests in attendance. In front of him stood a man and a woman, shoulder-to-shoulder, both dressed in wedding attire.

Soft light poured over them through the church's skylight, almost as if they were accepting the blessings of the gods upon their very forms—a sight so surreal and inexplicable that it left anyone who saw it breathless.

The bells chimed and resounded so close they were practically echoing through her head, a far cry from the muffled sounds from afar she came to know in the past. As the soft warmth that she felt on her forehead grew further away, she opened her eyes.

That was when a figure popped into her field of vision—a young man with slick black hair. Claudio stood before her, slender and beautiful in his black formal attire, far more splendid than that of any of the royals or nobles in the pews.

He hovered over her, a docile look in his eyes.

“My bride, you are quite adorable when you're bashful.” His sweet voice spilled from the set of elegant lips that had just planted a kiss upon Rosemarie's forehead not two seconds ago, which made the girl feel lightheaded. He wore the same sharply-featured human face he always had. Which meant that his words were more than likely honest.

(How did I get myself into this...?)

It all happened just the other day—actually, it was three months ago by this point. Claudio's aide escorted her to the waiting room, where—for whatever reason—the prince gave her a warm, courteous reception. Then, while she was stunned over it all, he proposed that they get engaged. Afterward, before she could even comprehend what was going on, negotiations with her homeland went through. Before she knew it, she was the distinguished fiancée of the Crown Prince of Baltzar.

And so, unbelievably enough, that is where we are now—right in the middle of the wedding ceremony.

The chapel built within Baltzar's royal castle was far grander than the one in Volland; it had a surreal, yet inexplicable, air of mystery about it. Even with the slew of people there, the mood remained pure and slightly tense.

(Oh, God, I want to go home... Why does the prince want to take a princess from such a small nation as his wife, anyway...?)

She was gung-ho to nominate herself to be Claudio's bride, but now that she had actually come to fill that role, she couldn't help but feel the urge to run away.

She wasn't particularly beautiful. She was socially awkward. And she was a cowering introvert of a girl. The diplomats that arrived with her from Volland had been in a panic, checking Claudio's intentions again and again. Even the people of her motherland thought that she wasn't a proper match for him, a fact of which she herself was well aware.

"I was attracted by your tender care—the same that showed concern after noticing how pale in the face I was." Rosemarie hid this bit of reasoning she had heard from Claudio from the diplomats—a piece of reasoning that made her, for the first time, want to wear a bucket over her head not out of fear, but out of embarrassment.

"Mind your feet, now." It would seem that while she had been locked in deep thought, the ceremony had gone off without a hitch. Claudio presented his arm and she grabbed on to it awkwardly, to which he smiled in satisfaction at her.

"I have finally managed to make you my queen. You have no idea how I have longed for this day to come," he whispered, his mind in a dream-like trance. Rosemarie responded with a bewildered smile.

Rosemarie had never been able to reciprocate the sheer amount of affectionate words with which Claudio showered her constantly. Even so, even now, neither his patience nor his love grew any thinner.

It didn't stop there, as in the three months leading up to the wedding, he did not allow her to return back to Volland even once. When she'd said she needed to return home as she'd only packed enough to attend the gala, he'd had whatever essentials she needed prepared for her. When she'd asked to go home to say farewell to her parents, he'd sent for her mother and (of course) her siblings well in advance of the wedding.

She missed the flowers in the villa's garden. But after hearing Claudio beg her not to return home because he would feel empty inside without her, she didn't have the heart to make any more selfish demands than she already had.

(It doesn't seem like he's telling any sort of lie, but...)

Ever since the night of that gala, his head hadn't appeared as a beast—not even once. However, he seemed absolutely opposed to

sending her back to Volland. That one thing didn't sit right in her stomach.

As Claudio escorted her down the aisle between the rows of guests, she caught faint glimpses of their beast heads between the flower petals they tossed into the air. Every time she did, her shoulders gave a pathetic little jolt. Without thinking, she caught herself squeezing Claudio's arm tightly. In response, and most likely sensing her nervousness, he stroked the back of her hand for support.

"What is your favorite color?"

"Huh?" She had no answer for the rather abrupt question. Pressed for time, she looked into Claudio's blue eyes.

"It's... blue."

"I see. Blue, is it?" Claudio nodded once, then glanced behind them. Close behind was the sorcerer who also acted as their attendant. They wore a gloomy-looking indigo hood and mantle quite unbecoming a wedding. As it covered their head and body, their face, gender, and even age were a complete mystery.

She had heard that a sorcerer affiliated with the royal palace and the state church's bishop would be present at the royal wedding. But, bishops aside, sorcerers were something that she wasn't familiar with even in her motherland, so they were a bit of a mystery to her—and a scary mystery, at that. A grand sigh poured out of that wizard's mouth.

"...Such a slog." The barely-audible yet weary-sounding voice definitely came from the sorcerer.

As Rosemarie's eyes widened in surprise, Claudio wrapped his hand around hers to get her attention.

"Please, behold." Claudio then extended his free hand above him and waved quickly.

"—?!"

The next moment, the multicolored flower petals being thrown by the guests suddenly transformed into a flock of small blue birds. A sudden mix of gasps and cheers erupted from the crowd around them.

The small blue birds chirped loudly as each flap of their wings scattered the same vibrant flower petals as before down to the earth, leading them to eventually melt away into the breeze. The sight was extraordinary... almost otherworldly.

(I almost forgot; the prince is a sorcerer himself...)

He apparently had the greatest mana of anyone in the nation, as well. This was probably nothing more than child's play to him.

After watching the flock of small birds in awe, Rosemarie softly turned her attention to Claudio standing by her side. As their eyes met, he smiled at her.

"Has that helped relieve your nerves?"

“—Oh, yes. Thank you very much.” The care that he was showing for her seeped into her body and filled her heart with joy. A tickle started to form in her chest and her pulse quickened, but the feeling of being devoid of tension and fear was not in the least unpleasant.

“You’re finally smiling, I see.”

“W-Was I not smiling before?”

“Well, you were, but it seemed somewhat insincere. I was a bit pushy in my proposal for matrimony, so I can’t say that I blame you for resenting me.” She didn’t resent him. She had just been at a loss as to how she should react.

Claudio let out a chuckle before leaning over ever so slightly.

“I will care for you. Every waking moment dedicated to you, never looking away, I swear,” he whispered quietly into Rosemarie’s ear. She blushed.

(Someone, bring me a bucket...)

For one thing, she wasn’t accustomed to receiving such words of affection. But, too, it didn’t seem like the sort of thing to say in front of such a big crowd. Not to mention, they were just about to pass in front of her family. This was not the right time to get embarrassed.

As she timidly looked their way, a pair of dog ears, the same brown color as his hair, had sprouted up on her father’s head. Next to him, her mother wore a white pair of rabbit ears atop her head. She couldn’t quite see her sisters, as they stood behind her parents. Her parents were smiling, but seeing as how they their heads had started to turn beastly, chances were that they weren’t actually pleased with this matrimony. In brutally honest terms, this was akin to a superpowered nation exerting its dominance and gaining an engagement as spoils, just as Claudio had mentioned.



Her face still red, Rosemarie smiled at her parents to reassure them.

She was going to be all right. Claudio was an honest person who didn't lie. Which is why it would all be all right.

(Which is why I need to tell him straight about my eyes...)

She saw the head of anyone who harbored animosity as that of a beast—she has yet to tell that to Claudio. She had made it this far, yet it was still extremely difficult to speak up about it.

She found herself perplexed that she was so biased in Claudio's favor that she was worried about the consequences of him potentially getting sick of her.

The chamberlain slowly pushed open the chapel's double doors. Suddenly, the ivory engraving above the door caught her eye.

A gallant lion rampant, with curly goat horns extending from its head, and elegant wings on its back. That was the creature placed on Baltzar's national flag—the silver lion, renowned as a sacred beast.

Squinting against the light of early summer beaming through, Rosemarie silently prayed for the silver lion to give her courage.

"I may still not approve of this, but if this is what you want, then that is just how it will be, princess."

Rosemarie left the evening wedding reception thoroughly exhausted and returned to the room she'd been provided. Now, she was trying to keep her tired eyes open as she listened to her trusted maid's complaints.

Said trusty maid sat Rosemarie down in front of the vanity and slowly combed her hair, inviting sleep all the more.

"No matter how scary one's face may be, no matter how suspicious one seems, so long as they do not harm a hair on your head, I do not mind." Seeing as how she did not specify "who" she was talking about, Heidi probably wasn't particularly upset.

She had been against the marriage to Claudio. But at the same time, she respected Rosemarie's decision—not that it stopped her from being outspoken about it, though.

"I love that you're so frank about these sorts of things, Heidi." Rosemarie admired the fact that Heidi could say what she herself couldn't. And since Heidi had been so unreserved in voicing her mind, Rosemarie felt she could be at ease, with or without the presence of a beast head. Having a mismatched heart and face is scary no matter what.

"Indeed, I also like how forthright you are, milady." For the final touch, Heidi ran a floral pomade through the girl's hair to set it, causing Rosemarie to let out a huge yawn. She wanted to just go

ahead and fall asleep, but she knew she shouldn't yet. According to plans, Claudio was supposed to visit after this. If she were to fall asleep, then she would have humiliated him.

(I'm going to tell him about my eyes, and then...)

She didn't really want to think about anything after that.

Suddenly, a cup with a hot brown liquid was presented her. The sweet vapors that rose from it made Rosemarie's eyes light up.

"Kaola! Why do they have Kaola here? You can't export it from Volland, so I had all but given up on trying to get any." Now completely awake, Rosemarie took the cup, practically giddy.

The Kaola fruit, which could only grow in Volland's soil, was banned from being transported into other nations. The tea was made from the seeds of the dehydrated Kaola fruit. But not only was the manufacturing process only passed down verbally through skilled artisans, it was also extremely difficult—so much so that it proved impossible for amateurs. Also, most importantly, the country had almost completely expended their supply of the fruit. Thus, as it was such a rare commodity, export of it was outlawed.

"His Majesty.... your father seems to have negotiated with the Union. According to him, he can ship however much you want to drink from now on."

"So, that's how. I ought to thank Father..." This was something she had been accustomed to drinking since her childhood. It brought a smile right to her face.

She inhaled the sweet aroma of Kaola tea, missing from her life for three whole months, and took a sip. Its distinctive bitterness and acidity spread through her mouth, leaving a faint, savory sourness in its wake. It seemed to soak its way through her weary body. Apparently, it actually had fatigue-healing effects.

"My, you surely can put it down. I'm unable to stomach it without any sugar. Though, the aroma alone is quite sweet."

"Um, well..." Rosemarie turned to look at Heidi, who was busy being impressed.

A knock at the door echoed, causing Rosemarie to tense and stiffen her face in surprise. Heidi grimaced for just one second before fixing her face the next, walking over to open the door for the visitor.

Rosemarie stared nervously into the brown, swaying surface of the tea, her body even more tense as she sensed someone entering the room.

"I bid you good night." Rosemarie heard Heidi saying her farewells for the night, and jolted her head up just in time to see her worried maid disappear out the door. The maid had been chatting about completely unrelated matters to take Rosemarie's mind off her impending honeymoon night... and now she was out of sight.

Rosemarie couldn't help but feel forlorn, sparking the urge to follow after her, but she managed to quell that urge after her eyes caught sight of Claudio standing by the door, clad in his nightclothes and robe.

The door was completely shut, and Heidi's footsteps were slowly slipping off into the distance. Claudio didn't budge from the doorway, regardless. He seemed to be checking outside the room.

(What do I even do in this situation...?)

After doing an awkward job of standing up, Rosemarie's eyes met with Claudio's as he turned around suddenly. He gave her a smile, causing her body to go stiff.

"What have you been drinking, if I may ask? Whatever it is, it has quite the sweet aroma."

"Oh, forgive me. I will finish the rest off right now."

Claudio looked on in bewilderment as Rosemarie brought the cup of Kaola to her lips in a rush, only for her to realize that it was too hot for her to drink. Claudio then came over to her, taking the cup from her with a wry smile on his face.

"You needn't hurry yourself. I simply asked what you were drinking."

"—Oh, um, it's Kaola."

"Kaola? That is a drink I've never heard of."

Looking at Claudio in profile as he peered into the cup atop the vanity with great interest, Rosemarie clenched both her hands and took a gulp. Hoarse from tension, she slowly opened her lips.

"Um, Your Highness. I have something I'd like to talk about, actually..."

"Yes, what might that be?"

Her throat trembled at the sight of Claudio smiling at her, but Rosemarie focused herself and formed the words.

"T-This may come across as somewhat unsettling, but..." As she said that, her heart was beating so loudly that she felt likely to pass out right then and there. Just imagining what would happen if she were to pass out was enough to make her poor heart feel like it was getting crushed.

"You see, I see the faces of people who have negative emotions, such as anger and envy, as beasts. It is so frightening that I can't contain myself. But yours is the only face that has looked human the entire time..."

Claudio quickly wiped the smile from his face. The fear of this news possibly making Claudio's face turn into that of a beast reared its ugly head, causing Rosemarie to look away suddenly.

"I am so sorry for not telling you! I have not been trying to deceive you; I just thought that you might end up hating me, so I just

couldn't bring myself to tell you..."

"—This problem... how long have you had it?" Claudio asked her in a tone that was so indifferent, she couldn't tell whether he was angry or surprised. A cold sweat started to run down the length of her back.

"I am not sure. All I know it started sometime when I was still young..."

"‘Sometime,’ was it? —Sometime after attending Baltzar’s National Foundation Day seven years ago, you mean?"

"...Huh?" Rosemarie widened her eyes in surprise. She looked up timidly to see that Claudio was glaring at her with a furrowed brow, which made her gaze in even more surprise.

(Is he... angry? But, I don't see a beast head on him... Also, "seven years ago"...?)

Considering Claudio usually had a smooth demeanor and polite way of speaking, his coarser tone caused Rosemarie to sink back in fright. For one thing, it was rare for her to see someone look angry while still retaining a human face.

"What's the matter? Do I scare you? If I am the only one whose face looks human to you, then you shouldn't be scared, right?" Claudio said, the corner of his lips pushed into a smirk. His expression was so brooding that it was hard to believe that this was the same person who had been smiling kindly for her up until a few seconds ago; the extreme and complete shift in tone left her speechless.

Claudio drew even closer to her. Fearful, she sank back. Her hand suddenly hit the cup that had been placed atop the vanity. The cup made a clanging sound before the sweet aroma of the Kaola enriched the room even more. Rosemarie looked that way involuntarily, but what made her freeze stock still wasn't the spilled Kaola, but what was being reflected in the vanity mirror.

"What...?" The tense, pale-faced, mahogany-haired young girl was herself. However, what stood next to her wasn't the black-haired crown prince.

Reflected in the mirror was a person with the face of a lion, its coat as silver as moonlight, and a pair of dark goat's horns with a sheen like black obsidian. In other words... the exact same face as that of the sacred beast she'd seen engraved above the chapel door. There was just one thing. Even in the dimly-lit bedroom, she could see that they had the same pair of blue eyes from when they were human.

"A... silver lion's head...?" She never once saw a beast head on Claudio before, so this was quite the shock.

The sudden disappointment and realization that this person was no different whatsoever from anyone else hit her like a ton of bricks. Her lips trembled.

The mouth of the lion in the mirror moved as Rosemarie continued to stand still in shock.

“Ah, so, you can see it when it’s a reflection in a mirror. Makes sense, seeing as how a mirror only projects the truth. What does my face look like to your eyes right now?” His overbearing tone forced Rosemarie’s timid gaze back over to him. His face was still human, albeit scowling at her, which allowed her to regain a tiny bit of composure.

“I see... a splendid gentleman.”

“And what about in the mirror?”

“A silver-haired... —?!”

If he said that a mirror only projects the truth, then... this reflection of a silver lion must be...

“Your Highness, does everyone else... see your face as that of a silver lion, then...?”

—Claudio, the Crown Prince of the Magical Nation of Baltzar, boasted the greatest mana of anyone inside and outside of the country. He was famed for his accomplishments as a warrior, as well. If one were to bring up a demerit in regards to him, it would be that his face is so terrifying that one look at it would be enough to haunt your memories.

She suddenly remembered the rumors. That was why her family and Heidi had looked so disappointed, and why Claudio had remained unengaged despite being of age.

The crown prince was deformed—his head was that of a lion. Just as she had always been in fear of beast heads, the people who saw Claudio were naturally afraid of him.

Rosemarie clasped her hands over her mouth, hardly able to believe what was happening.

“The reason for my deformed state and for your eyes’ unique problem is the same: seven years ago, you stole my treasure—my mana. Return the mana you stole from me, you ingrate!” He roared at her, exasperated and resentful. In response, Rosemarie shook her head vigorously. She had no memory of any such thing!

“I haven’t done anything. I never even met you until I attended the evening gala. I don’t remember ever stealing your mana, either. You must have me confused with someone else...”

“No, you and I have indeed met. I would know my own mana anywhere. That is why you see me as having a human face: you have what was once my mana. It wouldn’t be reacting to me if it was actually yours.” Although his scowl was focused on her and she was cringing in fear, Rosemarie tried desperately to remember.

When she saw Baltzar Castle, she felt as though she had seen it somewhere before, but she didn’t remember a thing once she saw

Claudio's face.

"I-I remember my father telling me he once brought me to Baltzar, but—I apologize, I just don't remember any of it."

"Yes, I'm sure. I'm sure if you remembered, you would have made contact with Baltzar at once, or some such thing. You have no idea how I've had to live with myself for these past seven years. I *saved* you in the Forbidden Forest, and how do you thank me? By robbing me of my mana, forgetting you ever did so, and then locking yourself away from the outside world. No, you *couldn't* know what I've been through."

Claudio pursed his lips tightly. Rosemarie could sense the rage seeping from his eyes, narrowed at her in hatred, and kept her mouth shut.

He could call her an ingrate and claim to have saved her all he liked; she still couldn't remember it. Her father had mentioned bringing her to Baltzar, so there was at least some precedent for what Claudio was saying. Even so, she couldn't know if he was lying. His head would remain human either way. Was it safe to just take Claudio's words at face value? If there was an off chance that her decision would bring about terrible consequences to Volland, she wouldn't be able to live it down.

"B-But... how would someone like me be able to steal mana from you? I'm not a sorcerer..." When she looked up to Claudio in a pleading manner, he fell silent, looking as though he might click his tongue in disgust at her. Silence befell them for a short while. Then a loud, dissonant laugh echoed out, almost as though it had been calculated.

"—That is a fair question, I'd say." The unfamiliar sprightly voice caught Rosemarie by surprise. She looked around the room for its source when, suddenly, someone rappelled down from the ceiling.

"...?!"

The person who landed before her was a man a few years older than Claudio, with golden-brown hair that fell in loose waves. The distinctive mole under his right eye gave off a somewhat amorous vibe to his persona. However, for some reason, he was clad in gaudy priest's attire.

"What are you doing here?"

"I get the impression, Your Highness, that if left unchecked, you would simply remain angry. I can understand that you're upset. But you've spent so much time wooing the princess and showering her with kindness that this sudden shift makes very little sense."

Unperturbed by the sudden intruder in his room, Claudio replied with a nonchalant tone and a cool expression. His behavior made Rosemarie's eyes dart around in surprise. Who was this person who

wasn't afraid of Claudio in his deformed state? More importantly, what was he doing dropping from the bedroom ceiling of a married couple?

"Wooing her? Enough of your misleading phrasing. I have obviously been putting up a well-laid front. The girl has my mana. So, of course, I needed to say whatever would keep her within Baltzar and in a good mood."

"Isn't that being a little too candid? You shouldn't go saying that in front of your wife. Right, milady? It's quite cruel of him, don't you think?"

Rosemarie stood dumbfounded at the somewhat casual conversation unfolding before her. When the topic suddenly shifted to her, she came back to her senses. She had the feeling that she heard some wild things being said, but she put it on the back burner.

"Excuse me... who might you be?"

"Oh, me? Why, I'm..."

"No introductions will be required. Don't show yourself when you're not even invited, you rotten priest," Claudio said, interrupting the man before he could introduce himself. He then grabbed him by the collar and tried to drag him toward the door, but the man shook him loose.

"At least let me tell her my name, will you? After all, we'll be seeing each other's faces pretty frequently from now on."

"There's no need for you to hold a conversation. You've said more than enough already."

"So, you're not going to let me talk to your wife? My, what a possessive prince you are. Kinda off-putting, if you ask me." As the man in priest's garb shook his head in disappointment, Claudio silently pulled out a knife from his breast pocket and tossed it at him.

The knife sunk into him—or nearly so, as the man casually bent backwards and kicked off the floor like a regular acrobat.

"Hup! Whoa, there. You're as dangerous as ever, Your Highness." The man who avoided the knife with the greatest of ease landed nimbly behind Rosemarie.

"I'm Fritz. As you can see, I've taken up the cloth for the state church. You can confide in me if you have anything troubling you, so feel free to come to me without hesitation, milady." Turning around, Rosemarie blinked at the man. He stood there, smug yet debonair, winking at her.

"You are actually a clergyman? I was convinced that was just a costume..." All her life, both at home and at the ceremony earlier, Rosemarie had only seen no-nonsense, straight-and-narrow sorts of clergymen. Honestly speaking, not only did he wear his formal priest's garb in a rather casual manner, but he was a far cry from Rosemarie's

impression of the squeaky-clean clergy lifestyle.

Fritz's eyes widened in shock, and Claudio, in what could only be called an unexpected twist, started chortling.

"A costume! Pft, hahah, you should really quit your day job."

"Well, I'm not. In the daytime, I carry out my duties with my attire shipshape."

Rosemarie bowed in apology to Fritz, flustered, as he let out a huge sigh.

"I am so sorry for my crass remarks..." If the tables were turned, it would be like someone telling Rosemarie she wasn't actually a princess. And if it were her, that would have brought her down.

"You don't need to apologize. He's the sort of man who comes to volunteer his services as my spy within the Church."

"Well, Your Highness, I can't just rest on my laurels. You are quite reviled in the Church, after all. Plus, believe it or not, I am a capable and popular individual. Remember that I have connections both inside and outside this nation. So instead of wasting away in some corrupt church, I would much rather have you put any of the intel that I've painstakingly gathered to good use." The face bearing that frivolous smile had not appeared beast-like in the least this whole time.

Everything he said was the truth. Nonetheless, she was shocked that such a carefree clergyman could exist.

"I more or less understand circumstances, Sir Fritz. But why the ceiling antics...?"

"Mostly for the fun of it, I suppose. Also, I was worried that Your Highness might lose control of himself with the fated young miss finally within his grasp, so I was keeping my eye on—! Your Highness! Could you *please* stop tossing those knives?!" Fritz slapped down the knives that came careening at him a second time. At nearly the same time, he grew a long muzzle, and his head transformed into that of a light orange fox. Rosemarie found herself going tense in fear.

Not even caring that the now anger-morphed Fritz was lashing out at him, Claudio scoffed in displeasure.

"What else do you expect? You're saying things to earn my ire. Now, leave. This conversation is going nowhere."

"My leaving is certainly an option. But what about your inability to prove how your non-sorcerer wife stole your mana? I believe that instead of losing your cool and threatening her, it would be easier and more helpful to make sure she can properly comprehend the details." Now that he'd calmed down, Fritz's face reverted back to human form—the same human face as before, with its amorous vibe (despite him being a man) thanks to the mole under his eye. Claudio reluctantly nodded, his face contorted into a sour scowl.

"—I get it. Let's do that, then." Claudio consented to the idea,

ordering Fritz to bring something to him. Once Fritz exited the room, Claudio silently sprawled on the sofa nearby.

Rosemarie shuddered, her shoulders shaking as she watched Claudio timidly. As Claudio sat with one elbow perched on his lap and propping his head up with his hand, his face exuded fatigue from every pore.

“A-Are you tired...?” In response to her simple, instinctive question, Claudio glared back at her as if possessed. It seemed she had touched on a sensitive subject. A chill ran down the course of her spine.

“Oh, I’m tired, all right. So very, very tired. And *you’re* the main culprit.”

So, she was the root of the issue again? She’d had so many accusations slung at her, she just wanted to curl up and clutch her head.

“Um, I hate to ask you this while you’re so tired, but would you mind explaining the situation in a little more detail? Like, how I managed to steal the mana from you, maybe? I may not be very smart, but I’m not making heads or tails of any of this, you see...” She said this in a subdued voice, standing idly in place.

Maybe the fatigue from earlier today was partially to blame, but she knew that her head wasn’t working at full speed.

“There’s nothing to explain. ‘Since you stole my mana, I’ve been unable to use sorcery, have had my head turned into a silver lion’s, and have grown ill as a result. You’re not going anywhere until I reclaim my mana.’ Simple enough, what’s there to understand?” Claudio said, knitting his brows in exasperation. The delicate care that he had shown to Rosemarie up until a few moments ago was gone as if it never happened. For as much as Claudio’s care and attention filled her with joy, Claudio himself actually didn’t mean a single bit of it—it was a fact that made the girl’s heart ache.

“... I’m sorry. I just don’t understand. I beg of you. Please, tell me.”

Claudio stared at her, silent and unmoving, as she pressed him for answer. Finally, he opened his mouth, extremely displeased.

—“Sit there.” Claudio gestured to the seat in front of the vanity with a jerk of his chin. Once she’d seated herself there hesitantly, he let out an exaggerated sigh.

“The Seed of Mana-Sealing is within me.”

“The Seed of Mana-Sealing?” She tilted her head in confusion upon hearing the piece of unfamiliar vocabulary, which prompted Claudio twitch an eyebrow, so she rushed to shut her mouth.

“The Seed of Mana-Sealing is just what it sounds like: it is designed to suppress one’s mana. My base mana was quite strong. And by drinking the Seed of Mana-Sealing, I suppressed it. Had I not drunk

of it, my mana might have ended up hurting even myself.” Claudio dropped his gaze slightly. He looked vaguely sad for a second before his sharp gaze immediately fell upon her.

“On our National Foundation Day, I saw a child going into the Forbidden Forest. You *do* know what I mean by ‘Forbidden Forest,’ I take it?”

“Yes, you’re referring to the sea of trees in the back of the castle, correct? I was taught in my royal training that it is the place where they enshrined the remains of the Silver Lion, the sacred beast that helped the foundation of Baltzar with its powerful mana while the nation was still forming. However, I remember hearing that those without mana who enter the forest blindly disappear... Could this child who entered the forest be... me, by any chance?” She recalled that she had been far more interested in the sea of trees she saw upon her arrival in Baltzar than in the sturdy castle opposite it. Seeing as she’d been an energetic bundle of curiosity in her youth, it wouldn’t have surprised her at all to hear she’d wandered into that forest on her own.

She clenched her hands tightly in her lap, waiting with bated breath. Claudio, on the other hand, continued nonchalantly, ignoring her question.

“—I chased after the child. I was already old enough to know that, on the off chance that it were the child of an official guest, their disappearance could develop into a diplomatic issue. Although, now that I know it was the princess of a fledgling nation, I wish from the bottom of my heart that I had left you be.”

“...Yes, you’re right.” Rosemarie slumped her shoulders dispiritedly, to which Claudio only gave a perturbed “humph.”

“I found the child up in the tallest tree of the Forbidden Forest, her face scrunched up in an unattractive mess, on the verge of tears. And when I attempted to rescue her, I had my mana stolen from me.”

Rosemarie felt Claudio’s strong gaze fall upon her, making her shoulders jump. To say that she was used to being stared at by the eyes of beasts would be an understatement. Being scowled at by a pair of human eyes, though, was a new experience altogether.

“After my mana had been stolen away, I gradually began to take on the form of the Silver Lion. First, my hair turned silver overnight. The next day, my skin became covered in silver-white fur. The day after that, the horns followed.”

That seemed to be the same process by which people’s heads turned into beast heads before Rosemarie’s eyes. The only difference was that it was a slow transformation over time as opposed to changing before one’s eyes. She had to wonder which was more frightening—witnessing it happen or having it actually happen to

yourself.

It wasn't clear if he was suppressing his anger, but the nonchalant way he was talking indicated how immense his anger was.

"All a destructive culmination that sprouted forth after the Seed of Mana-Sealing within me hungered for mana."

"Sprouted forth..." Rosemarie suddenly remembered a flower she'd grown hydroponically once before. She could sense the flower's energy and liveliness as she watched the white roots grow every day behind the glass of the bowl. At the same time, she could also sense something unsettling about the tangled, encroaching mess of roots. It made her shudder to think that the same thing was possibly happening inside of Claudio. She rubbed her arm, a chill running through her body.

"—That very Seed of Mana-Sealing is why His Highness's life is in danger."

Rosemarie jumped in surprise and turned toward the door upon hearing Fritz, who had made his return unannounced.

"If you've already made it back, then you should be quicker about entering."

"Well, I figured far be it from me to go barging in when you're finally in the mood to explain matters. This'll do, right?" Paying no mind to Claudio and his displeased glare, Fritz smiled bewitchingly and held up a broom.

"Yeah, that will do," Claudio said with a nod, turning his sights toward Rosemarie. She cowered at both his cold stare and unamused expression.

"You were able to rob me of my mana because you have a physical trait that allows you to do so. I shall prove that to you now."

"Huh? Wha, um, me... huh? Physical trait?" What she was being told made no sense. In fact, she had never been told that in the sixteen years she walked the planet. Rosemarie rose to her feet in shock, nervously patting herself down. Fritz stood before her, holding the broom upright.

"I'm sending some mana into this. Would you be a dear and touch it?" Even faced with a flustered Rosemarie and a grim, tight-lipped Claudio, Fritz was unfazed. He squeezed the handle of the broom, then let it go.

Just when she thought the broom would drop, it suddenly stood right back up. It was bobbing a little and seemed ready to fall at any moment, but it was most certainly hanging above the ground on its own.

"...?!"

Surprisingly physically adept for a clergyman, an inside informant with mana, and an even shadier customer than Claudio. Rosemarie

shot Fritz a shocked, bewildered look. He just stood there and shrugged.

“Yup, this is about the best I can do with my garbage-tier mana.”

“Oh, no. I think it’s incredible. I feel this would do wonders for housekeeping.”

“Ahaha. Let’s let it loose in the castle, then, shall we?”

“You will do no such thing,” Claudio said in a peeved tone. “What kind of imbecile are you? You’re testing my patience. Hurry up and get this over with.”

Fritz replied with a few halfhearted “Yes, sir”s, cleared his throat, and fixed his posture in his seat. Rosemarie, too, found herself straightening her spine in the midst of the serious mood.

“All right. Just give this a little touch, would you? This broom is currently imbued with mana, so if the broom falls once you touch it, you’ll have stolen the mana from it. That should be enough to convince you.”

Rosemarie gulped and reached nervously for the broom. She’d never heard of someone with a physical trait that caused them to steal mana, or whatever it was. If that really were the case with her, it would feel as though she had mutated—a terrifying thought, indeed.

Her fingertips touched the handle. As they did, an odd feeling coursed through her, as though she had touched lukewarm water. She jerked her hand away. The broom tottered dangerously in the air, then fell straight to the floor.

The solid noise that echoed in Rosemarie’s ears made her grab her hand in a flabbergasted daze. Her shoulders twitched as she was left speechless. The broom remained motionless on the floor. It didn’t rise back up.

“That... can’t be.”

“Now do you see? There is a trait in you that extracts mana from others. Do you believe me now?”

Rosemarie watched Claudio as he sat there, his hand resting on his face. She felt herself go limp and sank to the floor, sitting where she’d stood.

“—B-But Your Highness, you used magic at the wedding.”

Rosemarie grabbed for one last contradiction. “I had a sorcerer by my side, remember? It was their magic.” The contradiction was shot down immediately. All she could do now was hang her head in disbelief.

Everything Claudio said was true. While she couldn’t feel the mana she stole from him in her body, what she just saw explained everything.

“A prerequisite for becoming crown prince is that you have mana. No matter how small in quantity it may be. In my current condition, I run the risk of being cut off from the throne. —Now do you get it? Do

understand the severity of what you've done?"

Rosemarie's eyes widened and she squeezed her folded hands tightly. "W-Who knows of this...?"

"My father, King Baltzar. Fritz here. Alto Clausen, Vice Captain of the Imperial Guard and my personal aide. And Archmagus Edeltraud. There are a few chief retainers who also know, but those are all the people you need to be concerned with."

Rosemarie could read between the lines. *Those are all the people you've inconvenienced.* She had stolen Crown Prince Claudio's mana and caused his disfigurement. It was also apparently putting his life in jeopardy. It was no small wonder why he hated her.

"I am so sorry. I have been such a major inconvenience without ever even knowing. I will return your mana to you right away, Your Highness!" Rosemarie jumped to her feet and squeezed Claudio's hand with both of hers.

Claudio's icy expression tensed, as though he'd just been lied to. "...What are you doing?"

"Huh? Well, I'm trying to return your mana, so..."

"If all you had to do was hold my hand, then my head would have returned to normal long ago. That would make marrying you pointless." Claudio glared at her; she could practically hear him tutting at her, unamused. She lowered her eyebrows as a feeling of guilt washed over her.

He had a good point. If all he wanted was an apology and a quick turnaround of his mana, he'd hardly have to go to the trouble of marrying someone he hated. In that case...

"Um, could the way to do it be, by any chance..." She looked up slowly at Claudio, her eyes wide and innocent as a puppy's.

There was only one reason he'd have to marry her. Once it hit her, her face flushed with heat.

A vein bulged in Claudio's forehead as he spat out in a gravelly tone, "No, conjugal intercourse is not the way."

"Oh, of course it isn't!" The mere thought seemed to annoy Claudio. Meanwhile, Rosemarie covered her face with her hands, unable to hide her embarrassment. She was ashamed of herself. How could such an indecent thought cross her mind?

"Well, she's bound to get the wrong idea. Look at the situation she's in," Fritz quipped with a wry smile. Rosemarie nodded slightly, still hiding her face. She then heard Claudio let out an exasperated sigh.

"I still don't know how to get my mana back from you. However, there is a limit to just how long I'd stand keeping you as a guest. And having you taken prisoner would require fabricating charges, which is more trouble than it's worth. So, marrying you was the quickest and

easiest way to keep you here in Baltzar without inciting any public outcry. A wife is her husband's property. Not to mention, no matter how I treat you, divorcing me will prove quite difficult."

Rosemarie stared at Claudio blankly, her face tensing. She was told she had to return something, and had rather optimistically thought that meant she could do so right away. It seemed, though, that things would be a little more complicated than that.

"Once I get my mana back, your vision will also return to normal. Like it or not, until that time comes, you will remain here as my wife. —Then again, *when* I'll be able to find a way to get things back to normal remains up in the air." He flashed a cruel smile Rosemarie's way, making her shudder. If he didn't know the way, that meant he might look for a way, turning her into his own human test subject.

"I will stay here, but... y-you won't hurt me, will you...? I beg of you, please don't do anything bad to me." Tears formed in her eyes out of fear. The mental pain of seeing someone's head turn into that of a beast was something she had some resistance built up against, but physical pain was uncharted territory.

As she sat there, staring at Claudio's silent and emotionless face, Fritz, who stood right by his side, started to smile.

"Isn't this starting to sound, well, you know—more than a little indecent?"

"The only indecent thing here is your cesspool of a mind!" With a voice so low it practically skirted the ground, Claudio threw his third knife at the clergyman. However, Fritz gleefully and casually evaded it, followed by his exit from the room.

"Well, I did promise you at the wedding ceremony, didn't I? 'I swear to spend every waking moment dedicated to you, never looking away.' Of course, since you're my mana vault. I'm going to dedicate everything I can to you." A sarcastic smile draped across his face, Claudio rose to his feet, and calmly walked past the frightened Rosemarie. With his robe waving behind him, he headed toward the door.

"Ah, yes. You are not to breathe a word of what I've told you to anyone. Unless it is one of the three I mentioned before, you will not speak of my lack of mana under any circumstances." He shot a dreadful look Rosemarie's way, and she nodded her head up and down like a berserk bobblehead.

(Of course, my lips are sealed! But I want to go home soon...!)

"—Well, then, my royal wife, I hope you have a pleasant night." Claudio smiled affectionately, just as he had earlier that day, and exited the room.

Once he was clear of Rosemarie's bedroom, Claudio placed a hand wearily on his forehead and drew a long sigh.

"Never would've imagined Your Highness to speak to such great lengths. Weren't you supposed to be playing the role of the kind husband?"

He heard the voice of Fritz, who had exited before him. And when he looked in the direction of the voice, he saw the clergyman grinning broadly, with the handle of the broom from their previous experiment balanced on his forehead.

"You think that I can play the part as a kind husband when I'm dealing with someone who is nothing more than a living mana vault? Preposterous," he nonchalantly replied, proceeding to walk down the hallway.

"All that aside, who or what was on the roof?" Not even Fritz was devoid of enough common sense to go barging into a married couple's bedroom without adequate reason.

Fritz threw the broom over his shoulder and followed along, humming like he was in thought.

"A spy, I'm thinking. I was able to nab them, so they weren't a trained assassin."

"Granted, you get assassins foolish enough to get caught by you every once in a while. So, what happened to said spy?"

"I turned them in to Alto and he hauled them away."

"Ahh. That's why you came back." That explained why his knight aide was absent from his post outside the door. Fritz must have handed the captive off to his aide, then returned to the roof. There was no guarantee that the spy came alone. He had come back to keep guard just to be extra sure.

"I swear, those people never learn."

"They will probably stop at nothing to figure out my weakness." He sighed, murmuring his annoyance under his breath.

For a long time now, there had been some desperate to remove him from his position as Crown Prince of Baltzar. There was no indication of what they disliked about him, but they were persistent.

"They try to kill me from both outdoors and in, but I'm not taking my leave from this world so soon. I have this life of mine because of my parents and so many other people who have rallied to save it. I will not be killed without accomplishing anything." From within, the Seed of Mana-Sealing; from without, the warped desires of humans. His life was at stake on two fronts, but he was in no way prepared to give it up without a fight.

"Standing strong as usual, I see, Your Highness. That is the quality that makes me want to lend you my help." Fritz patted Claudio on the shoulder with a wry smile. "Well, seems we'll manage this Seed of

Mana-Sealing. I've collected intel at several different evening galas, but I never would have expected that the shut-in princess was the one who had your mana. Though, given her circumstances, I can see why she can't be brought outside. If her fear back there was any indication, it's going to be rough moving forward."

"You've got that right. I've lost count of how many times she's gotten under my skin." Suddenly, Rosemarie's pleased-looking expression from the wedding popped into his mind. Even though something had been threatening his life back then, her overly carefree, aloof attitude had disgusted him. It took all he could to suppress his rage. The same went for the three months prior, as he treated her with care leading up to their wedding day. The experience had practically been torture.

"Oh, our boy Alto's made his way back, so I'll mosey. I'll keep trying to gather that information you asked for." At the sight of a knight approaching them, Fritz waved good-bye and made his exit through the nearby window.

Claudio didn't stop to see him off as he faded into the shade of night, and instead continued walking to meet up with his knight.

Chapter 3: Newlywed Life is Tumultuous

“Heidi, I think that, right now, I’m blessed,” Rosemarie whispered in earnest, overlooking the gardens from her third-floor chamber window.

The dazzling early summer sunlight shone upon the courtyard, which was beautifully abundant with an assortment of multicolored roses. Come nightfall, they would be illuminated by the moonlight, bathing the garden in an atmosphere of fantasy. She’d never seen a flower garden like this in Volland. She could stare at it all day and never grow weary of it.

“Even though the prince has ignored you for going on seven days since the wedding, milady?!” Heidi, who had been readying tea right by Rosemarie’s side, stomped her foot with a *bam*, not even attempting to hide her irritation. As she did, a pair of adorable black cat ears popped up on her head. A pink nose and large green eyes followed, turning Heidi’s head into that of a rather beautiful feline.

Rosemarie had her breath taken away for just a second before she let out a small, reluctant laugh. Her transformation wasn’t all that scary, seeing as how she knew the exact reasons behind Heidi’s anger in this case.

“The prince is a busy man.”

“But his room is just next door to this one. *Just next door!* No matter how busy he may be, I think that the least he could do is say hello to you.” Despite her huffiness, the cat-headed Heidi skillfully brewed Rosemarie’s tea. The princess took the cup, letting out a deep sigh internally.

(Still, he could just keep on leaving me alone...)

She still hadn’t fully digested the shocking confession from their wedding night, and she’d spent the past few days in a haze. Claudio, meanwhile, had not looked in on her even once. Life had been so tranquil, it made her wonder if the whole thing had been a dream. Initially, her blood curdled at the thought of what he might put her through. But now, that feeling had begun to wither away.

“But he always sends all sorts of gifts, so it seems like he hasn’t forgotten about me...”

““He hasn’t forgotten about you’...? Your Highness... no, Lady Rosemarie? You are newlyweds. Not coming to see his new wife is quite dubious. What if you discover he’s been out on late-night jaunts

or something of the sort?"

"Late-night jaunts?"

"Yes, you know. Gallivanting? Making merry in the wee hours? In other words, *cheating*. That is deplorable for a fresh newlywed, don't you think?"

"...Y-Yes, right." She averted her eyes awkwardly as Heidi pressed close to her. The maid's straight cat whiskers grazed Rosemarie's cheek, causing her to back down a little.

(If I told her the truth, she just might strangle the prince...)

To Claudio, Rosemarie wasn't so much his new bride as his mana vault. It was abundantly clear from that nickname that he didn't view her as a person. While she couldn't do anything about him not liking her, she wished that he would at least grant her that kindness.

"Even so, let's think things through. If the prince doesn't visit me, I can live pretty freely, all things considered. And while I may not be able to leave the room without his permissions, I don't mind not having to see people. If anything, it's a welcome improvement. And there have yet to be any talks about my official duties as the wife of the Crown Prince, so I've not had my nerves keeping me awake at night. So, yes, that's why I said that I think I'm blessed."

"Lady Rosemarie, that is not being blessed on any level..." Heidi's face reverted back to human form with a sigh and a slump of her shoulders. Rosemarie saw this from the corner of her eye and happily put her lips to her cup.

"Oh? But you yourself said that all that matters is that I'm happy. I really don't feel constrained or anything like that. Though... Oh, but that rose garden down there has my interest a tad."

"Why not try inviting the prince? I'm sure then—"

"No, that wasn't what I was getting at. I was hoping he'd let me have some of the roses to raise in my room. I also want to use Hanna, since I haven't had a chance to in quite some time." She lifted a trowel from the desk, gazing spellbound at its sharp silver sheen. The area around her was lined with gardening tools—her trusty bucket, of course, as well as a watering can and shears. All of them showed signs of frequent use, but were well-maintained and free of grime.

That was a result of Rosemarie polishing them almost every day. Maintenance time was the most enjoyable time to her—she became engrossed, freeing her mind of thought.

"...Oh, this time you've given the trowel a name, have you? I beg of you, please do not let the prince see you admiring a bunch of gardening tools. Please?" Heidi placed her hand on her cheek in dismay and sighed. That was when it happened.

"There she is. The Volland princess." Suddenly, a somewhat sleepy-sounding whisper met her ears. Rosemarie came back to her

senses after staring at her trowel in a trance. Once she did, she found herself floating in mid-air.

“—?!”

“Princess!”

Her feet weren’t touching the floor.

As Rosemarie struggled in the air in attempts to fix her balance, she realized that the same gloomy sorcerer she saw at the wedding had suddenly appeared near the window. Because of their oversized hood, she couldn’t see their face, and with black gloves covering their hands, she couldn’t make out their age or gender.

“Claudio. Bad condition. Come.” The sorcerer conveyed their message in broken speech and drew a circle in the air with one finger. Before Rosemarie knew it, she was bottled up in what seemed to be a glass orb.

“Princess?! Lady Rosemarie!” Heidi’s face was wracked with panic as she desperately pounded at the surface of the glass orb. It was to no avail, however, as it did not crack.

“U-Um, excuse me! Where are you...” She heard Claudio’s name mentioned right before she was bottled up. She wasn’t panicking like Heidi was, but she felt tense all over. Could this be the beginning of the experiments to return Claudio’s mana to him?

The sorcerer didn’t turn around to answer Rosemarie’s question, instead murmuring something at the flustered Heidi. At their words, she fell limply to the floor.

“Heidi!” She tried reaching out to her now incapacitated maid, but her hand was stopped from going any further by the glass. Frustrated at the situation, she felt herself begin to bob along in the orb after the sorcerer.

“What did you do to Heid... Wait just a second here. This is the third floor!”

Perhaps Rosemarie’s pleas to stop didn’t reach their ears. Either way, the sorcerer climbed up on the window’s handrailing and jumped into the air. Likewise, the orb followed, leaping outside. Rosemarie held back her urge to scream and shut her eyes tight.

(O God, Father, Mother, Elder Sister, Charlotte...!)

She was still holding the trowel she’d been examining just before she was ensnared in the orb, and she squeezed her hands around it for dear life. She was on a collision course with the ground. But just when she should have felt a tremendous impact, she felt... almost nothing. Rosemarie then slowly opened her eyes.

The rose garden that she had been overlooking just a moment ago from her chamber window expanded before her very eyes. The roses were in full bloom, cascading like a flood of color. However, most likely because she was being obstructed by the glass orb, she wasn’t

able to take in their scent.

(I-I thought I was going to die there, but...)

Her tensed shoulders went weak. Her knees had probably gone weak as well. As she tried to lift her exhausted body to its feet, she saw the sorcerer, who had jumped safely down to the ground despite the three-floor drop, starting to walk without so much as turning back in her direction.

“You must be Mage Edeltraud, yes? Um, where are we... um, could you please listen?” Assuming they were the Archmagus Claudio had mentioned as one of his confidants, she timidly tried to get their attention. They didn’t look her way at all. And it was only a matter of time before her voice stuck in her throat.

The sorcerer had stepped into the royal castle.

(Eeeek! Wait, I can’t do this! Please, let me go back to my room...! No! At least give me my bucket!)

The sorcerer walked without an ounce of hesitation between the officials, knights, court ladies, and the aristocrats in service that all traversed the corridor—all the while with the glass orb holding Rosemarie in tow behind them.

This had turned into a total carnival exhibit.

Rosemarie was feeling a mix of embarrassment and fear, making her feel numb inside. She covered her face, which was somehow hot despite her going pale as a sheet, and contracted her body like a hibernating bear.

Rosemarie thought that this torture would last forever, but fortunately it wasn’t long before it came to an end.

“Mage Edeltraud! What in blazes are you doing?!” From the sorcerer’s destination, the sound of a young man echoed loud and clear over the clamor of the castle. She slowly peeked through the spaces between her fingers just in time to see a deer-headed knight with fine horns angrily coming their way.

“Move, Alto Clausen.”

“I will not. What are you doing bringing Her Highness here in such a manner? Please, I implore you to dispel your magic at once.” The deer-headed knight named Alto stared firmly, not giving in to the deadpan sorcerer.

(Alto Clausen? As in, Squire Alto Clausen? The Vice Captain of the Imperial Guard that the prince mentioned?)

Rosemarie stared fearfully at the deer-headed knight, her vision blurry from the film of tears in her eyes. The sorcerer—Edeltraud—gave a leisurely shake of the head.

“Can’t. Taking her to Claudio. Need Volland’s princess now. For Claudio.”

“For His Highness? —Oh, it slipped my mind! A thousand

apologies. Well, then, shall we hurry on along?" As soon as he heard that it was "for Claudio," his deer face started to flex and warp. Rosemarie averted her eyes, then turned back to see a human-faced knight with dark brown hair combed to the back, standing there with a dauntless expression. This knight, with his dark blue-tinged eyes and his steadfast persona, was someone that she remembered seeing often by Claudio's side over the past three months during their engagement.

The knight's 180 from challenging Edeltraud to siding with them had been all too fast, and Rosemarie waited on the results with bated breath. She felt herself go limp as she once again covered her face and dropped to her knees.

(Oh, for Heaven's sake. The prince's entourage is slightly off their rocker.)

Whether it was the clergyman Fritz who came dropping down from the ceiling the other day, this sorcerer, or that knight over there—they all made Claudio seem charming by comparison.

As Rosemarie sat there recalling Claudio enraged, the clamor around her suddenly came to a halt.

"Alto, I sent you to go see what the commotion was about... So, tell me. What is the meaning of this? Master Edel, I ask you the same. What are you doing?" Rosemarie heard a rigid, deep voice that she hadn't heard in quite some time, and she felt that she had been saved.

It seemed that the suspicious, interested gazes stabbing into her from passers-by had somewhat diminished.

As Rosemarie kept hiding her face and her tears of relief, the glass she was in poofed out of existence without any warning. The trowel that was bottled up with her fell to the ground with a light clank.

"Huh...?" She was overcome with a floating sensation that filled her core with dread.

"Delivery," Edeltraud said in an emotionless tone. As soon as Rosemarie heard them, she felt someone's arms catch her fall.

When she slowly opened her eyes, Rosemarie found herself in the arms of the black-haired crown prince as he casually stared at her. His complexion seemed even worse than when she saw him seven days ago.

"..."

"...H-Hello, s-so very nice to see you after so... long?" Rosemarie stammered out a whispered greeting as Claudio stood in overwhelming silence. He blinked once, then slowly curled the corners of his lips into a smile.

"Yes, my sincere apologies. I was so busy that I neglected you for quite some time. Not being able to see you made my lonesome heart ache." Her pulse skipped a beat at his words, but she soon reassessed.

(He doesn't mean any of this literally. It's all an act. Just an act.

He dislikes me, and there are people watching, after all.)

Even though she knew no amount of internal anger would cause her to see Claudio with a beast head, hearing him deliver those lines through human lips made her almost accidentally believe them.

“I was just in the middle of taking a little breather. If you would not mind my office as the setting, how about we partake in a cup of tea together?”

“Huh? No way...! Um, no, I mean, yes, I would like to partake. I would love to, in fact!”

She nearly made the truth known. But when confronted with his broad, threatening smile, she quickly varnished over her slip of the tongue. Claudio grimaced ever so slightly at the knee-jerk reply he was given, but he promptly started to walk on with Rosemarie still clutched in his arms. Alto and Edeltraud followed close behind.

“Um, sorry, but could you please let me down?”

All of the passers-by made way for Claudio, bowing their heads. As they stepped away, she caught their looks of shock mixed with the occasional tepid stare. It made her uncomfortable. She tried to move her legs in attempts to get down, but Claudio hugged her even tighter.

“Am I not permitted to bask in the joy of carrying your delicate frame in my arms, my dear?” The heart-wrenching expression on his face quickened Rosemarie’s pulse and heated up her cheeks once more.

(—I want to run back to my room and crawl underneath my bed...)

That is the only thing Rosemarie wished for as she continued to deliver a stiff, awkward smile.

Once the heavy door emblazoned with the Silver Lion was opened, they were met with the smell of ink.

In the office, there was a sturdy-looking desk that had years of usage behind it. The walls were lined with bookshelves. There was also a desk and sofa for visitors. They weren’t much different from the ones that were in her father’s royal office in Volland, but they reminded Rosemarie of home. As she was stuck in nostalgia, Claudio abruptly let out a deep sigh.

“God, you’re heavy.” As soon as she heard those words come from his mouth, Claudio suddenly let his arms go loose.

“Huh?! ”

“Your Majesty?! ”

While her body froze from the unexpected act, Alto, who had opened the door, rushed to catch her.

“Are you safe, milady?! ”

Rosemarie awkwardly nodded in reply as her pulse beat viciously. In response, Alto let out a huge sigh of what seemed to be relief. Alto's beast head had returned just after the fall, and he shot a critical glare at Claudio with a pair of deer eyes.

"Your Highness! What is it that you think you're doing?!"

"Don't shout like that, Alto. You're making my ears ring."

"Yes, a thousand apologies, but, sir—" Alto carefully put Rosemarie down. She sank to the floor, watching Alto from the corner of her eye as he fussed at Claudio.

(T-That made my heart jump... I never would have guessed he would just let me go like that...)

She was at least somewhat prepared when Edeltraud had dropped her from the third-floor window, because that came with the obvious expectation of falling. But getting the same treatment here, with no forewarning, was especially bad for her heart.

"All that aside, Master Edel. Why did you bring *that* with you? I am right in the middle of regulation and preparation work for the Imperial Bout. Experimentation to retrieve my magic will have to wait until after." Having half-listened Alto's complaints, Claudio sat at his desk, his lack of enthusiasm evident.

("That"...? He really is treating me as a mana vault.)

As she convinced herself there was nothing really she could do about that, she saw the sorcerer's gaze glide lazily from the books on the bookshelves to her.

"Seem to be in bad condition, so keep Volland princess by side. Sure it will heal you."

"Heal me? This princess will only steal mana, not heal."

"True, but not true. You must have noticed. Volland princess came, you weren't bedridden once leading up to day of wedding. Body felt better, didn't it?"

Edeltraud's statements caused Claudio's expression to turn bitter. Rosemarie took a good look and noticed that not only was it exuding fatigue, but that slight bags had formed under his eyes.

—*That very Seed of Mana-Sealing is why His Highness's life is in danger.*

Fritz's words from the night of the wedding popped into her head. Although the details were left fuzzy, it was more than likely that this was a matter of grave importance.

Rosemarie sat there and pondered until Alto, who had given up remonstrating Claudio, extended his hand toward her. His head had reverted back into human form, but his hand coming into view still caused her to jump slightly.

"You must excuse the crass remarks and behavior of His Highness. He has not always been like this."

“N-No, I can understand his frustration, so... Oh, I’ll be fine. I can stand on my own. That aside, if that, um, Seed of Mana-Sealing is harming the prince’s body, should we not just have it removed?” She meekly refused the helping hand up and rose to her feet, looking over to Claudio with a look of consideration. Her husband and the sorcerer were still exchanging words. Alto dropped his brows, looking slightly helpless.

“Yes, about that, you see—”

“Seed of Mana-Sealing. A punishment for serious criminals. Once drunk, can’t remove it until you die.” The troubling words spoken in the sorcerer’s sleepy voice cut into their conversation, startling Rosemarie.

“Long ago, used on sorcerers that committed crimes. With no mana, sorcerers can’t do anything.” Even though the sorcerer wasn’t that physically tall, they held an oddly intimidating aura, which made Rosemarie shrink back without even noticing. Their expression was a mystery, as the hood of their cloak covered half their face. It may have been no worse than the times Rosemarie saw people with beast heads, but the lack of emotion in the sorcerer’s voice made them seem that much more enigmatic.

“You’re wondering why they’d use something so dangerous. Right?”

“—Y-Yes,” she said, nodding her head timidly in response. Claudio put a hand to his forehead, furrowing his brow.

“I think I made mention of it before, but it was because my mana was far too great and couldn’t be contained. And it would be impossible for that mana to be expended conventionally. Mana, like blood, circulates perpetually through one’s body.” It has been said that the mana that pours from one’s heart is linked to your life force as well. This was also apparently why sorcerers were believed to live longer than normal humans.

“Yes, nevertheless? I had my mana stolen. Now that the Seed of Mana-Sealing has had its mana supply cut off, it’s morphed my head into a lion, and it’s stealing my vitality—both things that no one could have foreseen.”

Rosemarie chewed on her lip as intense guilt constricted her chest. It was no small wonder why he called her the “main culprit” behind all this.

“My body is gradually withering away, and I don’t know what will happen hereafter. —Aah, right. If I die soon, then you can return to Volland, huh?”

“I... would never...”

As Claudio delivered a mean-spirited grin with his arm on the desk propping his head up, Rosemarie could see how pale he looked... and

it wasn't just because of the backlighting from the window. She was pensive, thinking that he might collapse at any moment. He must not have known how woeful his weak smile was. It made her want to cry.

"Mm-hmm, that's why I brought Volland princess. Princess is bundle of mana. Source. Certain that her being by side was why condition improved. You realize that as well. That's why..." The sorcerer spoke with amusement, their words resembling song lyrics more than sentences, as they took a seat atop the desk. Then they pointed their gloved finger at Rosemarie. At the sight of that motion, she put up her guard, remembering that this same sorcerer had held her in a glass prison not long ago.

"Just always keep Volland princess in arms. Headache you have now will go away quick."

The wild remark caused Rosemarie's eyes to bulge in shock. Alto, who had stepped back to the side of the door, could be heard choking on his breath.

"Mage Edeltraud, that would be a little... problematic..."

"Why? Claudio's condition improves, mana probably returns little by little, Volland princess never gets lonely, I'll be glad that disciple gets healthy. See? Everyone's happy." The hooded head tilted slowly. Rosemarie grasped onto her skirt in a flustered panic.

(Well, I'm not happy, at the very least! In his arms? Always? Even during official work?)

Not only would she be exposed to the gazes of scores of people, but the odds of her having to watch people morph into beasts before her eyes would be greatly increased. That was no laughing matter.

Her thoughts were spinning so much it was making her dizzy. She stared pleadingly at Claudio. He pursed his lips, seemingly at conflict with himself, before eventually and reluctantly opening his mouth.

"—Fine."

"*Pardon?!* " Rosemarie and Alto's exclamations both perfectly overlapped one another. While somewhat relieved she had someone backing her corner in all this, Rosemarie desperately leaned forward toward the office desk.

"I am not lonely at all. And, um, it would be better if you were to neglect me. If you told me not to leave my room, I would happily stay locked in there forever. I am perfectly fine with not having free rein to leave. In fact, that way puts my heart at ease. I welcome it with open arms. I beseech you. Please reconsider."

"That is right, Your Highness! If rumor spreads that you've lost your will because of being wed to Her Highness, then it will tarnish your valiant and courageous name as Captain of the Imperial Guard. I implore you to reconsider!"

With both Rosemarie and Alto pressing near, Claudio put his hand

across his face, covering one eye, before letting out a very languid sigh.

“I thought I told you not to shout, Alto. I will admit that I had been improving for a while, but I have no intention of implementing Master Edel’s plan so easily. —I’m just saying it might have merit to try it out.”

Under the sharp gaze of Claudio’s unobscured eye, Rosemarie started to sink back from the desk she had lurched over in dismay. Claudio then grabbed one of her arms.

“You’re going to stay right by my side for a few hours until it’s time for dinner. If my headache improves before then, I’m going to have you follow me around starting tomorrow.” That news coupled with that haughty smile sent Rosemarie’s body into a shivering fit.

“But many people come in and out of this office, correct? I’m afraid I cannot. I feel that I will not be able to bear it...”

“You were fine during the wedding, weren’t you?”

“I was only fine because I was preoccupied with you, Prince. Oh, if I could possibly stay hidden underneath your desk, then... May we go with that option instead?” She looked at Claudio, clearly pleased with her idea, but his expression only grew sterner.

“That obviously fails as an option. Do you even know what you’re saying? As a matter of fact, you were saying some crazy things a second ago as well. All this being ‘perfectly fine to not have free rein’ and whatnot.”

Rosemarie’s pleas were flat-out denied, finally putting her in a corner. There was no way out of this. She pleadingly stared at Claudio as a last-ditch effort.

“Um, in that case, may I wear a bucket on my head...?”

“May you what?”

Claudio stared at her as if he were looking at something bizarre. Back to her senses, all Rosemarie could hope to accomplish was awkwardly turning her eyes away.

The crown prince’s royal office on that day was wrapped in an abnormal aura.

All of the officials, chamberlains, and even the court ladies that were coming in and out of the office tried to avoid looking. On top of that, the sight was bewildering all of the strangers to the office as well.

“—And as for this case here...”

“Ah, yes, this will be rejected. Attach some more worthwhile materials and bring it back. That irrigation works inspection schedule needs adjusting.”

“Very well. —Also, there is...”

As Claudio and an official shared a conversation right next to her, Rosemarie pulled inward and simply prayed that time would pass by faster.

The official’s occasional concerned glances as she sat on the sofa snuggled up to Claudio’s side hurt her soul. She had the undeniably strong urge to run away from it all. However, while they may have been suspicious, they weren’t being ill-spirited about it. The fact that there was no beast head was her only saving grace.

(I’m getting in the way of his work. I’m sorry... Just imagine that I’m a tree or a rock so that—)

Maybe it was because she was inadvertently attempting to pull herself away as she desperately tried to mentally vindicate herself, but Claudio’s arm wrapped around Rosemarie’s waist pulled her back to position.

It was an act that was less embarrassing and more—well, painful. No matter how physically ill he may have been, he was still the best warrior in and out of the country. He would easily crush her and her exercise-deprived body.

“Um, Prince...” Although she felt guilty for interrupting him, she softly called out to him. Claudio didn’t turn toward her call—perhaps not hearing her or maybe even just ignoring her. She lightly tugged at the corner of his jacket reluctantly, making the official standing in front of them clear their throat in a forced manner.

“Your Highness, I shall forward these documents to each department. In the meantime, I would appreciate if you looked over these and give your signature. That will mostly conclude today’s scheduled business.” That was all the official said before leaving in a rush, their face flushed for some reason.

Once the door was shut, Rosemarie and Claudio were the only people left in the office, which was his cue to scowl angrily at the girl.

“What do you think you’re doing? Don’t interrupt official business.”

“I’m so sorry! But, um, your grip is hurting me, so I...” She tried to make an appeal timidly despite going pale in the face, to which Claudio only furrowed his brow in response.

“It was because you tried to get away. This is the only way I can make sure of the results in a short time frame. Just deal with it. Trust me, I’m not enjoying this any more than you are.”

“...Okay.”

Claudio’s reasonable argument knocked the wind out of her sails, and she nervously huddled herself close. Claudio scornfully humphed and started scanning the documents left by the official. Nevertheless, he loosened his death-grip on her, most likely because she moved in

willingly.

Silence then fell over the room. The sound of pages flipping echoed throughout the room, and Rosemarie let out a silent sigh.

(I wonder how Heidi is doing...)

She asked Archmagus Edeltraud, and found that Heidi was simply put to sleep. She would likely be worried when she woke up, so Alto had apparently gone to inform her of Rosemarie's whereabouts.

The sorcerer—the perpetrator that put Heidi to sleep and created this predicament had wandered off somewhere else once they saw that their wild plan was being put into practice. They were the epitome of a carefree mage.

Claudio suddenly let out a tiny sigh. Rosemarie looked in that direction to see him in the middle of putting his signature to a document, having probably just finished scanning over it. She then stared intently at his side profile.

(Such a serious face. He is always so displeased around me, though...)

That didn't seem to be the case while he was working. His serious expression, brow no longer furrowed, added an even greater sense of strength to his already powerful features. This was something that other people's eyes couldn't see. Knowing what a disadvantage that alone was for him filled her with guilt.

"What is it this time?" Claudio asked, his tone annoyed, as he blotted the excess ink off his freshly-written signature. He was probably growing weary of Rosemarie staring a hole into him.

"Erm, so, uh, might I ask if your headache has cleared up?"

"—Wouldn't it be in your best interests if it *hasn't* cleared up?" Claudio said, grabbing a different document without so much as looking at her. Rosemarie blinked in response.

(He was being sarcastic... I take it? I can't quite tell considering his face is still the same, though... I would hate being forced to follow the prince around if it does clear up, but I certainly don't want to leave him in such poor condition, either.)

She gazed steadily at Claudio's face, sadness coming over her all the while. His complexion had improved a few degrees, but there was still a thick layer of fatigue, nonetheless.

Suddenly, Rosemarie's despondent eyes caught Claudio as he was going to take yet another document. She reached out to him in an unconscious effort, and Claudio's shoulders twitched slightly in response.

"What are you doing? Unhand me." She was met with his displeased tone and harsh gaze. This snapped her back to her senses, and she realized she had inadvertently held his hand back. Nevertheless, she did not unhand him. His hand, finished with angular

yet slender fingers, was far larger than Rosemarie's resting on it, and seemed ready to swat hers away at any moment. But it didn't, and Claudio simply scowled at her instead.

"I-I'm sorry, but these documents are not an urgent priority, correct?"

"That has nothing to do with you." Normally, she would have found herself backing down to his curt and standoffish attitude, but today she was driven by an odd sense of duty.

"It isn't urgent, then, yes? Even the official earlier said that work for today was over."

"And so what if it is?"

"I think it would be best for you to get some rest." Those were the same words she uttered the first time she met him. Watching him try to push himself to do unnecessary work in spite of his poor health was unacceptable to her.

"Your complexion may have improved a tiny bit, but your bags still remain. If you, um, push yourself too hard and make an error in judgment, it could end up spelling disaster, or... I... think... so?" She managed to assert without averting her eyes, despite the fact that she was slightly losing heart due to Claudio's scowling. He was probably used to hearing this same sound argument from Alto and other concerned people who knew of his situation. Even so, right now, she wanted him to get some rest.

Claudio's bitter expression lasted for a while, but once he actually did shake off Rosemarie's hand, he abandoned the documents atop his desk.

"Well, you told me to rest, didn't you?"

"Y-Yes, I did."

"Okay, then. I'm done with work for today," Claudio said, simply nodding. A grin spread across his face as he abruptly tugged the startled Rosemarie closer to himself, then pulled on her arm to bring her to her feet.

"Huh? Um, but I thought you were going to get some rest...?"

"Yes, a rest from work," he replied in a somewhat amused tone, which finally snapped Rosemarie back to her senses.

(Something is telling me I made a mistake, but, well...)

Rosemarie had the feeling that she might've angered him in a way that she shouldn't have. As she tried to hurry and apologize for her actions, Claudio exited the royal office with her in tow, with her trembling all the while.

"W-Where are we going...?"

"We're off for a stroll. Going to get a little fresh air."

Even she could see the stark change in his complexion. Rosemarie tried to throw off Claudio's arm and return to the office, but—almost

as if he'd been prepared for her to try just that—he scooped her up in his arms.

“Um, your headache...”

“Barely any ache left. Too bad for you.” Claudio’s fearless smile made Rosemarie tense all over. Even as they spoke, Claudio continued down the hall of the royal castle without a stop in his gait. In a similar fashion to when she was paraded off to the royal office, inquisitive stares from people laid into them. Rosemarie covered her face with both hands.

(I can’t run away anymore, so at least let me walk on my own two legs... Then again, if he lets me down, I might just sprint to my room...)

While she writhed in shame internally, things started to get brighter around her. The rays of the dazzling early summer sun shone overhead, which meant they must be outside now. At the sounds of clashing metal, she peered through the spaces between her fingers to inspect her surroundings.

(An open square...?) As the somewhat dusty air incited Rosemarie to cough, Claudio finally decided to let her down to the ground. She took a good look around to see several knights engaged in swordplay practice scattered throughout the square.

“Where is this...?”

“The Imperial Guard’s training grounds.”

That reminded her that his knight aide and Vice Captain of the Imperial Guard, Alto Clausen, had referred to Claudio as Captain of the Imperial Guard.

“Your Highness!” Alto emerged from behind the training knights and ran up to them. The sudden call alerted the other knights of Claudio’s visit, putting all eyes in their direction. Upon discerning the situation, the knights put their practice on hold in order to take to knee in reverence. The knights snapped into perfect, straight rows all at once. The sight made Rosemarie huddle against Claudio’s side, half in shock and half in fear.

“No, as you were, men,” Claudio urged with a wave. After a short bow, they resumed their training. Alto remained, his straitlaced expression growing even more earnest as he voiced his concerns.

“Are you feeling any better, sir?”

“Yes, much better. I thought Master Edel was just being eccentric, but it seems they weren’t mistaken,” Claudio responded with a wry smile to the relieved Alto, which caused Rosemarie to widen her eyes.

(That expression is so docile... I never knew he could be so expressive.)

Looking at that face, it became all too clear that all the smiling that he did for her before the wedding was fabricated.

For a moment, Claudio's uncommonly good-natured expression filled her with relief. Just as she was thinking how nice it would look from the front, Alto smiled pleasantly and said, "All thanks to Her Highness, I see." Alto's sudden segue caused a yelp to stick in Rosemarie's throat.

(Please stop, Squire Clausen! He looks like he's in such a good mood... Aah, he's angry now. He is, isn't he?)

Throwing an impaling stare her way, Rosemarie awkwardly flashed a smile while still cowering in fear.

"Yes, it's thanks to *this*. That aside, how is everyone faring?"

"Right, sir. Things among them seem to be faring well. I feel they will be perfectly able to display their prowess in the Imperial Bout as well."

"All thanks to the Imperial Guard Vice Captain's rigorous training, no doubt."

"It being rigorous stands to reason, sir. If you cannot be utilized when the time eventually comes, you are nothing more than dead weight." As Alto made that bold statement, the soldiers continued their simulated bouts behind him as though they were engaged in real battles. In the mix were some rather rugged-looking men, possibly because many in the Imperial Guard served as bodyguards to aristocrats. Their heads swapped back and forth between beast and human intermittently. Perhaps it was because they were in the heat of battle, or perhaps their obsessive focus on defeating the person in front of them turning into resentment. Either way, there was no sign of the sticky, unpleasant feeling she'd felt at the evening gala.

"—Alto, pass me a sword. I'd like to limber up a tad." Claudio unexpectedly held out his hand and requested a sword, possibly riled up by spectating the dueling unfolding before him.

Rosemarie stood confounded by the look on Claudio's face, at once war-hungry and youthfully mischievous. He tried to argue down Alto, who was hesitant to let him take up a sword out of concern for his health, resulting in the prince suddenly walking to the center of the training grounds.

"Anyone will do! So come at me, anyone!" Claudio shouted, prompting burly-sounding clamor to arise from all over the training grounds without a moment's delay. Within the blink of an eye, the knights had formed a circle around Claudio.

Rosemarie stood in awe at the training session that had then commenced. The knights were charging one at a time from the circle, but they were still coming in a constant wave—all of which Claudio was sidestepping with graceful movements.

Her mind and eyes were captivated by his lively appearance, and by the smile on his lips that made it clear he could hardly contain how

much fun he was having.

(He looks like he's really enjoying this...)

She wasn't sure if she was taken in by Claudio's excitement, but as she clasped a hand over her furiously-beating heart, Alto broke the ice from next to her with a question.

"Do you think that His Highness is strong?"

"Y-Yes, I may not know about anything technique-wise, but... I do think that he looks quite strong," she answered timidly. Alto then smiled triumphantly, his gaze still on Claudio and the others.

"He is strong indeed. He needs to be that way more than anyone else."

Before she could ask what he meant, Claudio summoned Alto with, "You can come at me, too." Alto obliged, bowing before jumping into the fray.

Peering at Claudio and Alto's one-on-one duel, Rosemarie repeated the knight's words.

(Stronger than anyone else? Why? A crown prince should have other people protecting him, so I don't think that he needs to be that strong, but...)

This vague frustration was starting to unsettle her heart. As that feeling ran through her, Claudio finished dealing with the line of knights and returned with a delighted smile.

"—I will be watching you all for a little while longer, so go ahead and carry on, men." Alto bowed, with a short, "Yes, sir!" before going back to the other knights. As Claudio watched him travel back, Rosemarie noticed the sweat trickling down his cheek, and pulled a handkerchief out from her breast pocket. She reached out to apply it to his face, but was interrupted when Claudio tightly grabbed her wrist.

"And what are you doing?" The immediate threat made Rosemarie drop her shoulders. Not an iota of his once cheerful expression remained. Although she understood why he was scowling at her, it still hurt her nonetheless.

"You were sweating, so I thought I would wipe it off..."

"Wipe it off?" Claudio seemed to be baffled by the explanation, but he quickly smirked.

"Oh, I see. I almost forgot that you see my face as a human. So, what? Is your plan to earn my favor? A naive plan, if it is." After chucking her hand away with a cruel smile, Claudio took a seat on the stairs leading away from the training grounds. Crestfallen, Rosemarie tried to sit on the step behind him.

"Sit here. I can't reach you if you sit there."

She picked herself up and sat once again, but this time next to Claudio as instructed. He then proceeded to wrap his arm around her

waist and draw her in just like he did back in the office, allowing the faint smell of sweat to grace her nose. She didn't hate doing this, but not only were they outdoors as opposed to indoors, as well as in front of so many people—albeit none of them paying close attention—this kind of conduct was so embarrassing that she wanted to just run away. Overwhelmed, she looked toward the ground.

“Um, it would seem that your headache has subsided, so I don't believe I need to be this close for you to...”

“This lets me breathe easier.”

Noticing his tone was devoid of ill-will, Rosemarie stopped mid-sentence. Hearing him say that had made her lose her nerve.

Regardless of how embarrassing she found all this, Claudio probably only saw her as a mana vessel that doubled as a restorative medicine.

(That must be why he is fine with other people's perceptions on the matter.)

As resentful as he was, Claudio was basically apathetic. It was dubious whether he even knew that Rosemarie was willing to help him.

Did he really plan on carting her around starting tomorrow? At least here at the training grounds she didn't have to be afraid of possibly seeing that many beast heads, but she knew well that she wasn't getting off the hook this easily. Since Claudio seemed awfully like the type to never back down once he'd made up his mind, it would likely be impossible to get him to give up on the idea.

(Is there nothing that I can do about this...?)

She looked down vacantly at the stairs while racking her brain—and that was when she felt something lightly tap her shoulder.

“...Huh?” A familiar sight of sleek black hair flew toward Rosemarie's eyes as she turned them in the direction of the disturbance. On her shoulder, she felt the somber warmth of another. For a moment, she had no idea what had just happened.

What had happened was that Claudio had slumped over onto her shoulder. Rosemarie jolted in surprise, which sent the arm that was wrapped around her waist to drop with a flop.

It seemed, as she had feared, that Claudio's condition hadn't improved at all.

(Huh? What? *Wait* a second.)

Rosemarie tensed up as she heard the prince begin to snore soundly.

How could he sleep so defenselessly in front of the very girl to whom he'd been so cruel, not even allowing her to wipe the sweat from his brow? Or maybe he was so exhausted that he just couldn't find it in him to care.

She stared at his head as it rocked slightly with each inhale and exhale, and the weight was making her heartbeat go wild for some reason. His black hair grazed past her cheek and tickled it, turning up the heat in her cheeks even more.

(T-This doesn't look weird from an outside perspective, right? Since he's technically my husband, it doesn't look off, right?)

However, at this rate, he'd end up with a cold on top of his already poor health.

"Um, Prince..." Her whispered call wasn't enough to wake him up, and his head slid down to her lap. The weight slipped from her shoulders to her lap, filling her not so much with shame as with blood-curdling fear.

(Please, wake up! Wait, no, he might kill me if he wakes up. No, in fact, he will definitely spew abuse at me!)

Having someone you hate look at you while your guard is completely down was probably the epitome of disgrace for Claudio.

She moved her hand to shake him awake, then withdrew in a panic. Out of options, she looked around her nervously. She locked eyes with Alto, who had been watching them in shock. She was saved... or so she thought. Her relief was short-lived, as Alto simply shielded his eyes with one arm and trembled slightly as though overcome with emotion. Then he bowed reverently and turned back to his men, who were observing the situation with piqued interest.

"No, please, save me... Please?"

"You know, I don't have the slightest desire to save you, either." Rosemarie could hear a snickering voice from behind her. She turned around in a fluster. It was the clergyman with the mole under his eye, Fritz, cheerfully looking at her from above. A stare and a blink was her only response.

"Good afternoon, Your Royal Wifeness. I had been on the search for His Highness, but never did I expect to see him in the midst of unwinding in such grand style."

"I-It was an act of God!" she screamed without thinking, the less than ideal phrasing escaping her lips at the sight of his suggestive smile. She gasped and shut her mouth. Luckily for her, Claudio had only grimaced slightly when she turned to check on him, but hadn't woken up. She sighed, patting her chest in relief.

"I'll tell you, the sight of a sacred beast being embraced by a fair, defenseless maiden would make for one doozy of a painting."

"... So you see him as a Silver Lion, too, Father Fritz. I had a feeling." Alto acted in similar manner around him as well, but Fritz was absolutely not afraid of Claudio, and interacted with him casually—casual as casual could be, in fact—so that fact had almost slipped her mind.

“Um, this has always struck me as peculiar, but... why do the people of this country still recognize him as the crown prince even though he’s morphed into this deformed state?” Normally in a situation like this, it seemed no one would bat an eye if he were disinherited.

“Oh, that? You see, since our country’s sacred beast is the Silver Lion, we’ve proclaimed to the masses that he’s its reincarnation. That’s why you’ve got everyone welcoming his presence, albeit fearfully. His Highness is always saying that he who stands at the top must at least be feared.”

“The circumstances would be different if this were a different country.”

“Maybe, but he is actually devoid of mana and he’s deceiving the masses, so he might just get cut off if he keeps this charade up. — Regardless, he sure can sleep, can’t he? It’s been a few years in the making, so I suppose there’s not much we can do about that.”

“A few years in the making? What do you mean by that?” she replied, confused. Fritz’s expression grew a tad dim.

“He never tells any of us any of the specifics, you see, but ever since His Highness was robbed of his mana, he has had great difficulty sleeping.”

Rosemarie’s face tensed up. She was never told of that before. If he had spent years not being able to sleep, it was no wonder he’d built up so much resentment toward her. Feeling all the more guilty, Rosemarie looked down aching at the napping Claudio’s docile face.

“And that is why Squire Clausen wouldn’t come to help me, then? Come to think of it, he mentioned that he could breathe easier, as well.”

“Ah, then I assume that must mean he was able to go to sleep because you were by his side, holding his mana. So, yeah, given that, would you mind just letting him sleep for a little longer?”

Rosemarie was in mid-nod to Fritz’s request before she gasped in realization.

“That is, if you could provide a way for me to not earn the prince’s ire when he eventually wakes up...”

Fritz, who had been smiling in relief, then averted his eyes, followed by a few steps back.

“Um, well, I’ve got some work to do, see...” A forced smile on his lips, Fritz’s head bent and warped around until it morphed into a fox with a pelt of vivid light orange fur. However, this was no time to be afraid of that.

“Please, don’t lie to me. I beg of you, please, help me. Father Fritz, you said that you would be there if I need to talk about my problems, did you not?”

“No, no, those are two different matters. I’d rather not have His Highness kill me.”

“I feel the same.”

“Um, no, I’m sure you’ll be fine. You are his dear, dear wedded wife, after all!”

“...Mm.” Claudio grumbled slightly, probably due to the shouting. Both of them clammed up immediately. Fritz’s face reverted back to human form as he made a gesture, petting his own head, and then pointed at Claudio.



(He wants me to pet the prince's head? Huh? Is that a smart idea...?)

She laid a hand gently on his black hair. It felt soft, with just a little bit of bounce to it. As she moved her fingers across his head, the wrinkles in his forehead started to disappear, and his snoring resumed its more peaceful tone.

They both simultaneously sighed in relief. Fritz squinted his brown eyes as he smiled pathetically.

"I had a report for His Highness. But, well, it's not all that urgent, so I guess I can leave it for later. Besides, I'm too afraid to wake him up now."

Rosemarie very much wished he would wake Claudio if he had business, but Fritz simply waved his hand and took his leave.

When he was gone, Rosemarie stopped petting Claudio's hair and gazed at him, sleeping with this docile expression she'd never seen before. She put a hand to her chest.

(If he can sleep on my lap of all people, then I suppose a little longer would do no harm...)

She feared Claudio's reaction when he awoke. Even so, it felt like she was gaining some valuable experience, which made her happy enough to eke out a smile.

The sounds of the pen scribbling echoed abnormally loudly throughout the crown prince's silent office.

Rosemarie sat on the sofa and looked from afar at Claudio as he signed documents on his desk. He suddenly put his pen down with a clunk, causing her to hold her breath.

(This is so awkward...)

Three days had passed since the day where Claudio had that nap. Claudio had promised Edeltraud he would keep Rosemarie by his side if the headaches subsided, so he'd ordered her to come to his office.

However, for the past few days, Claudio hadn't clung to her with her arm around her like the first day. Instead, he'd hold her hand for a few hours at a time with an expression that could only be described as reluctant.

(I was worried when he didn't say anything when he woke up, but...)

At the time, Claudio just seemed shocked that he had fallen asleep. Not addressing Rosemarie at all, he simply ordered Alto to take him to his room, and he didn't touch upon the subject the day after. It must have been humiliating to Claudio to have fallen asleep next to someone he detested, after all.

That day, she thought she was lucky to have a glimpse into such

an invaluable moment, but those feelings had mostly diluted.

Once Rosemarie breathed a little sigh, there was a knocking at the door.

“Enter,” Claudio replied. Through the door came a middle-aged clergyman clad in elegant priest’s garb embroidered with silver thread. Behind him was Fritz, whose meek face made him look like a different person altogether. Claudio grimaced ever so slightly.

“Well, this is quite the rare visit, Archbishop Kastner.”

“I hesitated requesting you leave your work to come all the way out to the church, Prince Claudio,” the clergyman replied with a smile. His calm and composed face suddenly warped. His full head of silvering black hair started to shed, and the pupils of his gentle, squinty eyes morphed into those of a reptile. A bisected snake tongue poked its way out of his mouth, which was now split from the front all the way to his ears. Although his skin was covered in dense scales, parts of him were oozing off him like they were rotting. But for some reason, this only occurred on the right side of his face, while the other retained its gentle looks.

“...!!” Those vertical pupils glanced at Rosemarie, and she covered her mouth in attempts to stifle her incoming scream of terror.

(What is that? Why isn’t he a full beast head?)

She had never once seen a case of only half of a person’s face changing like that. With him in that state, he practically looked like a monster. Though the deformities were similar to Claudio’s, the prince’s were an even balance of lion and ram. So this was all the more terrifying.

Frantically trying to contain her urge to flee, she squeezed her hands in her lap. The Archbishop passed wordlessly past Rosemarie, seated on the couch, and stood before Claudio at his desk.

“I am here about tomorrow’s Imperial Bout. I have heard that you shall not be participating this time around.”

“Oh, it’s about that, is it? Yes, His Majesty instructed me to abstain. He said it wouldn’t be entertaining for me to compete since it’s obvious I’d win.”

“His Majesty’s order... So, I see. Actually, His Eminence the Cardinal has come from the Holy Land with high hopes of seeing your bout, Prince Claudio.”

“Sorry to disappoint, but if you’ve come to try to convince me directly to compete, you’re barking up the wrong tree. You should try His Majesty.” Claudio spoke bluntly, as if to drive the Archbishop away, and picked up a document to signal the end of the discussion. However, Kastner didn’t back down, smiling slightly wryly.

“I see. Understood, then. I shall go and consult His Majesty instead. After all, I’m sure Your Highness would love to show off your

skill to the Princess.”

Rosemarie shivered at her introduction into the conversation, a cold sweat running down her spine. She felt his eyes upon her, but fear had contracted her throat, making her unable to utter a word.

“Not quite. The princess is from the pacifist nation of Volland. I wouldn’t want to expose her to combat and fall out of her favor. Besides, the paladins of the state church would be more appealing and worth watching.”

“Oh, no. She was able to marry you, Prince Claudio, so her heart must be strong indeed. I shall go to beseech His Majesty, as insolent as it may be, in order to see you put your magnificent skills on display, Prince Claudio.” Without complying to Claudio’s reasoning, Kastner smiled calmly and left the office, not once glancing at Rosemarie.

As soon as the Archbishop was out of sight, Rosemarie unraveled from her tension, lurched her body forward, and covered her head. She couldn’t stop her fingers from trembling like mad.

(What... even was that? Honestly, it was terrible...)

Ever since she started staying in Claudio’s office more, she had managed to endure seeing visitors with beast heads. But she couldn’t handle that monstrous form.

“Hey, are you listening?” Claudio’s ill-tempered question snapped her back to reality. Gradually lifting her head, she saw Claudio glaring at her in suspicion while still sitting at his desk. He had apparently been calling out to her repeatedly now.

“I asked you, what did you see him as?”

“... One half of his face was a decaying lizard. The other half was... human.” She found the remaining human half more repulsive than the lizard half.

“I see. That is quite the fitting form,” Claudio said with a scoffing grin.

“The Archbishop... do you have something against him?”

“No clue. At the very least, that one has been challenging me. To the state church, this disfigured form could be considered heretical.” Even so, she had never seen that level of malice. It would have been far better if he’d had a standard beast head like everyone else. Bringing it back to mind sent her into a wave of shivers.

“Nevertheless, things have gotten quite cumbersome. That one will definitely convince His Majesty.” Claudio tensed his brow in a wholeheartedly unamused manner.

“Do you not want to compete in the Imperial Bout?”

“Have you forgotten how I look? No one would be so foolish as to make a spectacle of themselves in such a way. Plus, the Cardinal would be in attendance. It would practically be suicide.”

“...Ah, yes, you’re right.” A lion-headed prince fighting would

indeed have made for a good attraction. She had asked the wrong question. Regardless, since it seemed as though he entered last year, he might have been thinking of it as official business.

"I went through the effort to have His Majesty issue orders to keep me from competing, but where did he overhear any of that...?"

"His Majesty... I assume that he thinks the world of you, Prince." Deformed as his son may have been, he was still his precious child. That fact somewhat warmed her heart, but Claudio looked baffled.

"Were you listening to what I was saying? *I went to His Majesty* to request that he give orders to bar me from participating. It wasn't a conscious decision by His Majesty himself. He's never coddled or treated me special. But, by the same token, he's never challenged me, either. And besides, this was never about him 'thinking the world of me' to begin with."

"Oh, is that so...? But if he did not think the world of you, he wouldn't have approved of you withdrawing from something that you've been entering yearly, right?" She stared at Claudio, watching the wrinkles on his forehead slowly start to diminish. Perhaps it was because he'd never considered that, but his slightly befuddled expression filled Rosemarie with delight. Her lips curled into a smile. That brought Claudio back to his senses, and a faint blush formed on his cheeks.

"And just what is so funny? You have that naive look on your face. —At any rate, if I participate, then it will serve as a diversion in and out of the country. Thinking about it, this is just what I needed." Despite the disparaging remarks, Claudio forcibly changed the subject, perhaps in an attempt to hide his embarrassment. That helped soothe Rosemarie's heart, but a wave of concern suddenly came over her.

"Um, but, are you in the condition to do so? It's just, you seemed to be lacking so much stamina that you're falling asleep at the training grounds..." she nervously inquired, and Claudio pursed his lips in response. The fact that he was giving her a serious look, rather than a scowl, made it hard to tell if he was angry at her. She smiled just to be safe.

When she did, Claudio flashed a broad, suggestive smile of his own.

"Right, about that. You're going to be helping me with that." That smile had some unsettling implications behind it. But a new visitor knocked on the door before she could pursue it, so the opportunity was lost.

She questioned if she was having a nightmare of her wedding day. Claudio was seated on the bed before Rosemarie, the picture of

composure, and she felt the desire to put her bucket right over her head.

“Um, may I ask why you are in my room?”

“Because I’m going to be sleeping in here, obviously. I told you that you’re going to be helping me.” That afternoon after the Archbishop’s visit, just as Claudio had predicted, he was informed that he was cleared for participation in the Imperial Bout from King Baltzar. He may have been purporting it would be a spectacle, but he may have been hiding a desire to participate all along. Claudio had finished his work and seemed to be in good spirits when Rosemarie left him. But after her usual evening meal and bath, he made an unexpected visit around the time she was preparing for bed.

Heidi, unaware of the entire situation, seemed to be conflicted between being delighted and being resentful. Either way, the fact that she was turning into a black cat was leaving an impression.

“After all, it would appear that I can sleep when you are around. You’re going to help me for the sake of my health,” Claudio declared in a refreshingly clear manner. Rosemarie covered her flushed face with both hands in reaction—perhaps seeing the writing on the wall. This was a terrible form of harassment.

(Well, of course, this is a life-or-death situation to the prince. But as a trade-off... *I* might be the one with problems sleeping instead...)

Claudio reeled her in by the arm, and she nervously climbed into bed. She figured it was because the bed they were in was meant for two, but as she lay there with a warm hand grasping her own, it didn’t really feel as though he was nearby. Even so, she wasn’t getting drowsy in the slightest. Slowly parting her eyes halfway and looking to her side, she found Claudio with his eyes shut tight. Partially thanks to the dimly-lit room, the shadows cast over his face made her vaguely worried as to whether or not he was alive. She stared at him, worried that he might not be breathing. Just as she saw Claudio’s brow furrow up, he slowly opened his eyes.

“Is my face that uncommon to you? You sure are staring at it like it is.”

“No, um, ‘uncommon’ is not the word... I was just somewhat concerned as to your complexion. Also, the fact that I do not see you with a beast head has been a marvel to me.” For someone who had always had ill-will manifest itself in visible form, she couldn’t help but marvel. Just being able to see an expression with an abundance of human emotions was invaluable.

“A marvel, eh? —I have to wonder how you see my real face through your eyes.” Claudio squinted as Rosemarie tilted her head in response.

“Your face does not look human even to yourself?”

“No, it doesn’t, and it doesn’t have the feel of human skin if I touch it, either. It’s virtually the same texture as a beast,” Claudio said, smiling sarcastically.

Looking at his untidy appearance, Rosemarie reached the tip of her finger over to Claudio’s cheek without thinking. While it was a little low in temperature and chilly, she felt smooth human skin.

“I can see your face as human. You also have the proper texture of human skin. Prince, you are no beast.” If Claudio’s head turned into the sacred beast’s seven years ago, he would have still been a child then. If she had been the one feared by all around her since then, she would have gone absolutely mad.

Claudio raised his hand unnaturally, probably in an attempt to brush Rosemarie’s away, but it fell back to the bed limply. Even in the faint darkness, she could see glimpses of relief flashing in and out of his blue eyes as they widened in surprise.

(Even though he doesn’t seem like he ever has anything to fear, has that been a concern even for him?)

Claudio didn’t say a word, so Rosemarie started to form words in a fluster.

“Um, but... I’m sorry. I will do my best to not look at you so much.” He likely already had enough people staring at him out of curiosity and fear with his beast head. Add someone he despised into the mix, and there was no doubt he would find the situation even more grating.

“—I’m not telling you to apologize,” Claudio murmured bluntly after a short pause, turning his face away to escape the hand touching his cheek. At the same time, though, he squeezed his hand a little more tightly around hers.

(If so, what did you want me to say?)

Up until now, Rosemarie had discerned whether someone was angry based upon the bestial nature of their heads. She had gotten somewhat used to Claudio and his quick shifts to anger, but she was losing her grip on what to do with regard to his gestures and tone—neither of which held the same resentment as his words.

“Quit observing me and hurry your way to sleep. You’re going to be busy tomorrow, too.”

“Huh? Do you mean I will be filling some sort of role as well?”

“Did I not already tell you?”

“No, I don’t believe I was informed,” she replied, blinking. Claudio then put his unoccupied hand to his forehead and let out a deep sigh.

“Aah, I almost forgot. The word came after you’d left the room, I suppose,” Claudio muttered as if to himself, then glanced at Rosemarie.

“According to tradition, the winner of the Imperial Bout receives a

handkerchief belonging to the most important lady in all the land, in lieu of a formal prize.”

“In recognition of their courage, correct?” Even among all the knowledge she’d had crammed into her during her engagement before becoming Crown Princess, this was one tradition she thought especially odd.

“Volland doesn’t have such a tradition, so, it...huh?! No, I couldn’t! I simply couldn’t!” The gist of what Claudio was trying to say dawning upon her, Rosemarie brought the comforter over her head as if trying to flee.

“Who else will do it if you don’t? The Queen Mother has filled that role up until last year, but she is of old age now. This year we have you around, and I received word that she would gladly step down if I am going to be off competing. I’ll ask you one more time: who else will do it if you don’t?”

Her only reply to Claudio’s exasperated question from the other side of her comforter barrier was a violent shake of the head.

If the Queen Mother, Claudio’s grandmother and most important lady in all of the land, was stepping down, duties should have fallen upon the queen. But the queen, Claudio’s mother, had passed away when he was still an infant. Given that, the duties would inevitably fall to Rosemarie.

“M-May I be so bold as to ask if I can wear my bucket on my head...?”

“What is this whole bucket nonsense? Do they conduct official business with buckets on their heads in your country?” Claudio asked in an irritated tone, to which Rosemarie shook her head while still curled up into a ball.

(He is right. This is official business. Yes, it’s official business... Aah, but, I’m so scared... I’d love to run away...)

A slew of people under one roof was bound to be teeming with animosity—not to the same degree as the Archbishop earlier, but still there, regardless. She was obligated to stand in the midst of all those beasts. With her body shivering like mad, she squeezed the comforter tighter.

“Are you that afraid of seeing people’s heads as beasts? Personally, I wouldn’t find the fact that you can instantly identify people who harbor animosity cumbersome at all; in fact, I’m envious.”

Rosemarie’s breath was caught in her throat for a second due to Claudio’s envious-sounding wisecrack.

(Huh? ...He is envious of my eyes? He is... *envious* of being able to see any and everyone’s animosity?) Rosemarie felt some muddled emotions sprouting in the pit of her stomach.

She had been plagued by these eyes ever since her childhood.

Although she was a princess, her inability to stand in front of strangers has not only been giving herself a hard time, but everyone else around her as a result. The mere thought was incredibly pathetic and filled her with guilt.

Claudio said that he was *envious* of those very eyes.

“—Very well. I will take up the role,” she spouted in a terribly cool tone. While she had the shivering under control, her body felt cold as ice on the inside. Claudio’s hand started to feel awfully heavy in her own.

“Well, that is a sudden shift. Why are you so motivated all of a sudden?”

The sudden change in her attitude was undoubtedly giving Claudio room for suspicion as he tried to pull away the comforter from her head, but she desperately clutched the blanket as if saying, “Not so fast!” She didn’t know what kind of expression she was making right now, but she didn’t want Claudio to see it regardless.

Most likely tired of dealing with Rosemarie and her shellfish-like obstinance, Claudio relinquished his hold on the comforter with little persistence.

“I don’t know what’s going on with you, but if you say you’ll take up the role, then you’d best do it and do it right.” She felt him squeeze his hand slightly in hers. At the single tug of her arm serving as her response, Claudio had nothing else to say.

After a short stint, she could hear Claudio’s quiet snoring.

He was so sound asleep, it was hard to believe he’d ever had the sleepless nights that Fritz mentioned. Looking at him so sound asleep tormented her, spreading a gloomy feeling through her chest.

Was she annoyed? Was she sad? Or maybe she was uncertain and nervous over her role in the Imperial Bout tomorrow? Rosemarie couldn’t answer any of those questions, and instead let out a deep sigh.

“There are so many people here, princ- I mean, Lady Rosemarie!” Half out of excitement, Heidi came rushing into the waiting room with flushed cheeks, causing Rosemarie to rise from her seat.

“Huh? Is it already my cue? Wait, h-hold on...”

“No, you still have a while to go. Please, calm down, Your Highness.” Rosemarie’s eyes darted around the room without an ounce of composure. There, she saw Alto waiting by the door with a wry smile drawn across his trustworthy face. She sank back into her chair as if drained of her energy.

Night had passed, and it was now the day of the Imperial Bout.

Apparently, the preliminaries had been going on for a few days,

but once it came time for the main contest, the number of spectators skyrocketed. Alto had told her that in Baltzar, where sorcerers were sprinkled all across the land, battles conducted between blades without the use of magic were quite popular.

The cheers and fervor of the crowd could even be felt from the waiting room facing the arena—so much, in fact, that it made Heidi restlessly ask permission to go and check how it was outside.

Having returned, Heidi patted her chest and caught her breath.

“...Don’t startle me like that, Heidi.”

“My apologies. The excitement of it all got to me. Oh, Prince Claudio seems to be on a tear through the competition.”

“—I see,” Rosemarie said and awkwardly nodded upon hearing Claudio’s name.

Ever since last night, she hadn’t been able to clear her mind, and was barely able to get any sleep. It was almost like she had contracted Claudio’s insomnia. However, it seemed that Claudio had a good night’s rest, and had gone off to the Imperial Bout in high spirits. It also seemed that since Claudio was so skilled, even though he was a last-minute entry, he was put into the main bracket.

Rosemarie’s unenthusiastic reply prompted Heidi to furrow her brow in concern.

“Are you nervous? It will be fine. All you need to do is, *boop*, gently toss the handkerchief to the victor.”

“Good maid, a simple, uh, ‘*boop*’ will not do. She needs to properly hand off the handkerchief—from one hand to another.”

“Oh, bother. You’re so uptight. Well, princess? A *boop* into the hand will do, right?” Alto sternly rebuked Heidi as she spoke in a tone brighter and cheerier than usual. Upon seeing this, Rosemarie chuckled a tad.

Relieved by that gesture, Heidi offered to make some tea and excused herself to the tea set already prepared in one corner of the room. Rosemarie turned her gaze from Heidi and suddenly called out to Alto, who was standing at attention by the door.

“Um, I do apologize for making you act as my bodyguard, Squire Clausen. I know you wanted to participate in the Imperial Bout...”

“Your concern is appreciated, but unnecessary, milady. There would be some slight complications if I were to enter, so I abstain from participating every year,” Alto said, smiling over his dubious statement. Rosemarie blinked, perplexed, and Alto’s smile grew troubled.

“Rather embarrassingly, my sword techniques are not up to snuff. I also have somewhat of a habit of getting riled easily in the heat of battle, which contributes to me being all thumbs, so I wouldn’t stand much of a chance.”

For a knight whose convictions lie in the concept of fair-and-square combat, that was a bit of a problem. He was right, he couldn't participate given all that, but it was incredible that he managed to rise through the ranks to Vice Captain of the Imperial Guard in spite of that. Perhaps seeing the doubt written on Rosemarie's face, Alto smiled gently.

"I am ever so grateful to His Highness for deeming me as an invaluable resource despite my obvious flaws. Seeing as how you are held near and dear by His Highness, I have absolutely no objections to serving as your bodyguard. So please, rest assured it is not an issue, Your Highness." Alto gave his knightly salute by putting his hand to his chest. Rosemarie stared at him with mixed feelings. Since his head was still human, she could be sure his words came from the heart. That same thing rang true even for Fritz, that clergyman who remained carefree even around Claudio.

Claudio must have been a good master to all of his aides and retainers—otherwise, he wouldn't have been this well-loved.

She thought about how envious that made her—envious over building bonds so strong that you earn that much of an individual's trust.

(Still, who do I envy out of the two—the prince or Squire Clausen?)

Rosemarie wasn't sure which it was.

"Princess, here is your tea. It was quite hot, so I've let it cool off a tad. Unfortunately, I've run out of my stock of Kaola, so I had to settle for regular tea this time around." Rosemarie was suddenly presented with a cup of moderately warm tea.

"—Thank you, Heidi." After seeing Heidi's smile, Rosemarie felt her sinking mood resurface. She responded with a smile of gratitude toward the maid, the one person who had never once abandoned her despite her flaws.

Heidi found herself overcome with emotion and trembling.

She watched Rosemarie present the prestigious handkerchief to the victor of the Imperial Bout from a short distance away, her heart going positively wild.

Rosemarie stood at the top of the long flight of stairs leading down to the arena, so nervous her face was drained of its color. Regardless, she kept her back straight and stood with dignity.

(I know the princess can be self-deprecating, but...)

Her big green eyes were trembling with insecurity, her tiny pink lips were all pursed up, and her nose was a little on the flat side. But as far as her overall impression, she reminded Heidi of a small animal

—the kind that makes you want to protect and nurture it. Together with her head of red hair, she looked as lovely as a wild rose.

And the person who had taken to one knee before said lovely princess was the lion-headed prince with a shiny silver mane. The black armor that adorned his firm body only served to accentuate his manly demeanor.

A wild beast being attached to a fair and defenseless maiden—it was like something out of a play or story. Devoid of any realism, it was pure fantasy. From a spectator's point of view, it was the ultimate spectacle.

(Princess, you only have a little bit more to go, so just hang in there, please!)

Although she had no idea whether Claudio being the victor was intentional or not, it was likely a fortunate outcome for Rosemarie. Standing in front of an unfamiliar person was a laborious task for her mistress.

Heidi watched with bated breath as Claudio pressed the handkerchief against his chest, and proceeded to kiss the hem of Rosemarie's dress and her tiny slender hand.



But the whispered conversations from the maids standing right beside her were making her scowl.

"I will say, he *is* nice to look at from a distance, but I would hate to have that person as *my* husband. It also doesn't, well, help matters that he fell in love at first sight the way he did."

"Entirely agree. That head of his is *dreadful*. I believe His Highness himself is a fine individual, but I wouldn't feel so inclined to take up with him. That said, he is the perfect match for that dense *barnyard* princess."

Occasionally, conversations like this filled with fear and vitriol were shared among the maids.

She was a dense princess who came from the countryside, and a pitiful princess who happily wedded a prince who fell in love with her on first sight, despite his head being that of a literal beast.

She couldn't bear to tell Rosemarie what was being said about her, nor did she want to let the girl get anywhere near the source. After all, Rosemarie had the misfortune to literally see the animosity of others. Heidi wanted to shield her from that as much as possible.

They probably didn't even know that Heidi was a maid from Volland that followed Rosemarie here. While those maids were having their lively little chat without so much as looking her way, Heidi was biting her lip, trying to contain herself.

(Should I just go ahead and tell them? But if I do and the princess catches word, things will get ugly—literally *and* figuratively.)

Heidi contained her irritation so that it wouldn't show on her face and turned her back to the chatty maids. It was just about time for Rosemarie to come back from the arena, so she had no time to stand around listening to nonsensical chit-chat.

"Excuse me, might you be the maid attending to Her Royal Highness?" A voice called out to Heidi as if in hot pursuit from behind her, to which Heidi forced a broad smile and turned around. There she saw a girl with a calm demeanor, clad in a maid outfit, standing apologetically in front of her.

"Yes, that I am. Can I help you?"

"On behalf of those girls, I apologize. You were selected by His Highness personally, yet all that terrible gossip..."

"No worries. We have to learn to put the past behind us, after all." She coerced her with her broad smile. There wasn't really anything she could do with a misguided apology, because the one they *should* be apologizing to *wasn't* Heidi.

She curtsied to the other maid, now sadly standing silent and stock-still, before turning on her heel.

(Oh, for heaven's sake, I *need* to hurry and get to the princess!)

Rosemarie was surely frozen in tension and fear. She had to get to

her side quickly and console her in any way she could.

Heidi trotted down the corridor like a woman possessed, picturing her poor mistress heading toward the arena, her face pale and her shoulders shivering in fear from the ordeal.

Her vision wavered.

Once Rosemarie managed to move her tension-frozen body and go back into the building from the arena, she staggered on her feet.

“Your Highness, are you all right?” Alto asked, by her side on bodyguard duty, proceeding to prop her up by the shoulders. Rosemarie feebly nodded in reply.

There was a pressure bearing down on her, even greater than she’d felt at her wedding, just from having so many people see every step she took and every move she made. That included both the human-headed ones and, naturally, the beast-headed ones in attendance. As a result, her fear was doubled.

“Oh, I’m fine. I just had a bit of a dizzy spell...” Maybe the lack of sleep was to blame? The moment that her nerves loosened up, she felt lightheaded. She didn’t know if she was going pale as well, but she felt somewhat cold. As she shut her eyes, she felt a hand that wasn’t Alto’s cradle and prop up her shivering shoulders.

“—?!” She shook the hand off her out of reflex as a dusty smell grazed past her nose. When she opened her eyes, she found Claudio there with a furrowed brow like always—that sharp glare causing her muscles to tense up.

“Oh... I apologize, I didn—” Claudio waved slightly with the hand she’d brushed aside, then looked away from her with displeasure.

“Alto, search for this one’s maid. A familiar face might help calm her down a little.”

Alto replied with a curt “yessir” and exited the room. Watching him do so from the corner of his eye, Claudio sighed to himself.

“What did you see *this time*? Monkeys? Bears? Or maybe there were some lion heads in the mix? Your vision being off-kilter isn’t a death sentence, you know. You call yourself the princess of a nation when you’re freaking out over every single thing imaginable? Pathetic. King Volland coddled you far too much. I don’t see how you’re going to live in Baltzar with that sort of behavior.” Although the corridors were devoid of human activity, Claudio kept his voice down just in case; but his voice still betrayed his irritation. Rosemarie did nothing but look down at the floor.

—Personally, I wouldn’t find the fact that you can instantly identify people who harbor animosity cumbersome at all; in fact, I’m envious.

What he told her before she went to sleep last night echoed in her

mind. Everything around her seemed to go red.

The emotions she had been queasy about before had begun to boil, and began pushing their way through her throat.

“—my father, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“I can’t hear what you’re saying. Quit murmuring and speak up.”

“I *said*, I’d appreciate it if you stop insulting my father, if you wouldn’t mind. My personality is a product of my own doing, and the reason I have the eyes I do is because of you, Prince. If I had the option, I would have taken the beast head instead. I would much rather be pathetic and afraid than feared by everyone else.”

“What did you just say?”

“If you are so envious of my eyes, then I will gladly give them to you. It isn’t as if I stole your mana because I wanted to—”

“*Silence.*” Claudio’s groomed eyebrows dipped inward into an intense scowl. He forced her face into his chest, giving her no other option but to close her mouth.

“Do you know *where* it is you *are*? Luckily, there’s no one here, but we’re in a *public* corridor. You never know who might be listening and where. Blurt out all of that carelessly and you’ll let things you, too, would rather not be aired out into the open.”

“I wouldn’t care even if they were.” She thrust herself away from Claudio’s chest and raised her head. Seething in rage, Claudio cast his pair of blue eyes down at her. But the girl stared right back, undeterred.

“Prince, what do you think I am? A mana storage vault? A slumber-ready pillow? I am aware that you hold a grudge against me, but you don’t understand that I have feelings as well. If you did, you wouldn’t—”

“I don’t understand your feelings? Did I hear right? No, it’s because I understand that I’ve tried to be mindful and prepared a waiting room for you. Normally, you’re supposed to spectate with His Majesty and the retainers. Considering you so fear being in the public eye, I arranged things so you wouldn’t have to be. So please, explain your tone.”

“That... I didn’t...” She hadn’t been aware of that. Mainly because Claudio hadn’t told her a single thing about it. She wasn’t smart enough to just infer that, and she didn’t have these sorts of events in her homeland, so there was no way that she would know what was out of the norm and what wasn’t.

“Um, but that’s not quite right. That isn’t what I’m trying to say here.”

“Then what in blazes are you—” Seeing Claudio’s face go beet red with anger made her will to object against him start to wither, but she tried to continue explaining in hopes of helping him understand. That

was when he suddenly cut himself off. She saw that his eyes were drawn toward the end of the corridor, and she looked there herself in turn. There they saw a girl clad in a court lady's attire nervously poked her head around the corner. Rosemarie had never seen the girl's face before.

"What is it?"

"O-Oh! Yes, well, His Majesty has been searching for you, Prince Claudio. The celebratory banquet is about to begin, you see..." Upon hearing Claudio's gravelly question, the lady's face went pitifully pale. She delivered her message while glancing at Rosemarie, and Claudio nodded in response, completely composed.

"Okay, I'll be on my way. Tell them to go ahead and start the festivities without me."

The court lady cleared the area like a bat out of hell upon hearing Claudio's response. Upon doing so, Claudio forcefully pulled Rosemarie's arm and started walking.

"Um, I never heard that I needed to attend."

"Yes, because I never mentioned it. I knew you wouldn't want to attend, so I was planning on telling them you had to miss the banquet because you were feeling under the weather. But I've changed my mind. You're coming with me. After all, you said that I don't understand your feelings."

Rosemarie tried to protest as Claudio dragged her along, nearly making her topple over, but he replied without even turning around to face her. His voice was no-nonsense and he was clearly enraged.

Rosemarie proceeded through the corridor being half-dragged by Claudio, heading toward the grand hall where the banquet was being held. On the way, they passed by several people who looked shocked, but that didn't stop Claudio from walking on.

(I mean, I didn't know that he had put so much into consideration like that...)

She would have never known unless he told her. There was no way for her *to* know. She was both reflective on her actions and reluctant about the situation. With her mind on both ends of the spectrum, she reached their destination.

The congratulatory banquet was already underway just as Claudio had ordered when they arrived.

"Your Majesty, my sincerest apologies for not being on time."

The clamor encapsulated her body.

The gazes of the people in the hall into which she'd been dragged were sticking into her, to the point of pain. Her heart was fluttering like mad.

Even while Claudio was extending his apologies to King Baltzar, she was afraid to look around the room.

Claudio walked proudly through the crowd of people clamoring to see the guest of honor. Rosemarie tried to grab hold of his arm, but he suddenly broke free of her grasp. Then, with a forced smile, he said:

“Would someone entertain my wife for me? I’m going to go dust off.”

As soon as Claudio said that, he quickly turned back faster than Rosemarie could react. Needless to say, this left her in a panic.

“Huh...? Prince, please, wait a—”

“Come now, Your Highness, care to chat with us until His Highness makes his return?” She felt the slender hand of a random noblewoman gently touch her on the back. Rosemarie looked over to her in dread, and was filled with momentary relief when she saw that the noblewoman’s face was human—her eyes quickly widened in shock, however.

Her thick, beautiful hair was as black as the night sky. But in the blink of any eye, it had transformed into pear-yellow feathers. Her eyes that shone with curiosity took a fully circular shape. Her pair of beautifully-painted red lips jutted forward, curved, and morphed into a hard, black beak. The noblewoman who had transformed into the head of a parrot—a creature that Rosemarie has only seen in illustrated form—was trying to strike friendly conversation.

“The word is that His Highness devotes every waking moment to you. I am quite envious of how happy of a couple you two make.” The woman flashed a forced and ambiguous smile as Rosemarie’s face tensed up. When she did, another woman that was standing by her side leaned forward. Her white dog head with its large, open mouth made Rosemarie want to shriek, but she stifled it.

“Indeed. We were also selected as marriage candidates for His Highness, but it seems that we were not to his tastes. Now that we know his tastes lie in the innocent types such as yourself, I see that we did not stand a chance.” The pairs of animal eyes staring straight at Rosemarie were clearly not amused. If they wanted to be Claudio’s wife enough to harbor real envy, they should have been able to. They gathered bridal candidates from neighboring countries because there were no suitable candidates around.

Even if these girls had no desire to get married, they probably didn’t like that some country-bred princess was now the most important lady in all the land after the Queen Mother.

Their lies, their disparaging words, had made them take on beastly forms in Rosemarie’s eyes.

Rosemarie’s violently beating heart was dredging up bad memories along with it.

“I can’t *stand* you, Lady Rosemarie.” The first time she ever saw a beast head on someone was with the noble’s daughter she was most

friendly with.

“I’m sorry for what I said earlier. I really do love you.” Just as when she’d said she couldn’t stand Rosemarie, the girl had the head of a rat atop her shoulders. Apparently, she was only apologizing because her mother scolded her once she caught word later on.

Anger, animosity, negative emotions—that was the very moment she learned that all of those things will make her see people as beasts.

The mismatch between her words and her face was horrifying.

“Your Highness? Is something the matter?”

“You must not be used to such a boisterous locale, I assume.”

The parrot- and dog-headed noblewomen let out scoffing laughs while mouthing words of concern. Rosemarie felt as though she was going crazy, tightly squeezing her hand.

“I’m... sorry...! Please... excuse me.” She managed to squeeze those words out through her frantic panting as she backed away.

She knew what she was doing was a bad display of manners. However, she wanted to run off to somewhere unpopulated as quickly as possible.

Dodging through people, she tried to bolt for the exit, but an individual clad in silver-threaded priest’s garb interrupted her.

“Oh, my, if it isn’t Her Royal Highness. Are you not going to wait here until Prince Claudio makes his return? If you were to make an early exit, Prince Claudio will be quite cross at us. We promised to keep you company, after all.”

“—Archbishop?”

It was Archbishop Kastner, half of his face reptilian and melting off. The human part of his face smiled and looked at Rosemarie.

“Now, this way, my child.” Kastner took a step forward and presented his hand. His monstrous form approached her. Rosemarie furiously shook her head and stepped back.

(Why is his face like this even though the prince isn’t even here?)

They didn’t have enough contact with one another for him to have such animosity toward her. As much as she was confused, she was just as—if not more—terrified.

Rosemarie’s behavior was strange to the whispering people around her watching her dubiously, but she no longer had the mental capacity to be concerned about that. The monster-headed Archbishop was standing right next to her.

“Your Royal Highness.”

“...Please, do not touch me! No, no, go somewhere else!” Slapping his fingers in mid-reach away, Rosemarie cowered in fear in place.

The crowd was astir. She didn’t know what they were saying, but she didn’t want to hear it and covered her ears with both hands.

(Please, I beg of you. Don’t come near me. Just leave me alone. I

don't want to hear anything—see anything.)

Suddenly, with her eyes shut tight, she could see the image of a young boy holding out his arms with a consoling smile deep in the woods.

“P-Prince...?” Seeing the young boy's face with a passing resemblance to Claudio, she had a vague feeling of dizziness even though her eyes were shut.

Something warm unexpectedly came over her body. Having noticed she was being embraced by someone's arms, she tried shaking them off; but that only served to strengthen this person's efforts to hold Rosemarie back. Unable to freely move, she slightly opened her eyes to see her maid, who was pacing around in concern.

“Heidi...”

Rosemarie had visual confirmation on her trusted maid, which allowed her to find genuine relief as she let the energy exit her body, her tear-stained eyes unwiped.

“It seems that my wife wasn't feeling very well. She caused quite a scene.” Claudio looked around, his hold firm on the now-unconscious Rosemarie in his arms. The suspicious faces were filling him with an internal sense of impatience.

“It would seem so. It had me quite concerned.”

“Forgive me. I uttered that request without even thinking.”

“Oh, think nothing of it. It was partially my fault for trying to touch her without due consideration.”

Claudio apologized one more time to Kastner, who stood there with a gentle smile, and then quickly left the area. Heidi followed him, flustered, with Alto and his solemn expression joining up right after.

“Master Claudio, what is the meaning of this?” Heidi asked, clearly enraged, as Claudio proceeded down the corridor with Rosemarie clutched in his arms. He ignored the question and continued walking. Her temper reaching a boiling point, Heidi circled around in front of him and cut him off.

“Please stop being secretive and tell me what you've done to the princess!” Claudio saw Heidi's slender eyebrows dip into a scowl, and his face took a very sour turn.

“I took her to the banquet and left her by herself, knowing full well she doesn't do well in public. That's it.”

Speechless from her anger, Heidi's face grew redder and redder by the instant.

“I never thought that she would lose her composure this badly...” At the wedding, his office, and the Imperial Bout not too long ago,

Rosemarie would go pale and start trembling, but she never once brought her emotions this out into the open before.

“Why did you do such a thing? Are you saying that the princess did something to upset you that much, Prince Claudio? Well? Did she?”

“...” Claudio was struggling to find his words.

Even though he spared no expense to make the despicable person who stole his mana comfortable, she brushed away his hands when he tried to stop her from falling off her feet in terror. And then she told him that he didn’t understand her feelings—two things that sent him over the deep end in rage.

As he thought about it now, he didn’t quite know why it made him that angry.

“Good maid, leave it at that. If you stir up commotion, it will damage Her Highness’s reputation. Your Highness, allow me to take Her Highness off to her room. It might pose problems if the guest of honor is not present as his own banquet.” Alto butted in to defuse the situation, and Heidi reluctantly backed off. Claudio passed the unconscious Rosemarie off to Alto’s waiting arms, and after a quick bow, he began walking away.

Claudio watched Rosemarie and the others go off into the distance, but as they disappeared behind a corner of the corridor, his fatigue hit him and he clutched his forehead.

He felt an emotion coming from within—an emotion called guilt. It was heavy, felt like lead, and was bearing down on his chest.

“A rare blunder on your part, eh?” A cheery yet disappointed voice unexpectedly addressed him from behind. When he turned around, he could see Fritz, the mole under his eye lifted by his wry smile. Claudio grimaced, getting the sense he was being criticized.

“...I never expected her to be so afraid that she would lose her bearings. She had never displayed such behavior up until now.”

“She had been enduring it because she didn’t want to inconvenience you, Your Highness. Quite the mental fortitude considering she’s not even aware of stealing your mana, I’d say.”

Claudio glared at Fritz as he shook his head in disappointment, then turned around and started walking back to the hall. Fritz followed in his path, but Claudio didn’t rebuke him for doing so.

“Still, I never would have pegged the royal wife as being able to say something that would actually upset you. But you said something to upset the royal wife beforehand, didn’t you?”

“—I recall besmirching King Volland, saying that it was pathetic she cowers over every little thing.” However, was that alone the reason?

“I don’t think any sensible person *wouldn’t* be upset by someone

badmouthing their father, but... there must be some other reason as well. Why not try thinking back and remembering? Just apologizing for abandoning her doesn't really count as an apology, after all."

"...! Why are you taking that *thing's* side? They even said that they would have much preferred having a beast head instead."

Fritz passed by Claudio and quickly walked toward the hall—an act that made Claudio grit his teeth in frustration. Fritz turned around and raised an eyebrow.

"I'm not taking anyone's side. My point, Your Highness, is that this girl, who lives in constant fear, got so angry that she found it in herself to lash out at you. Now, cool down a little and give it some thought," Fritz said, as if admonishing a toddler. Then he turned back around and departed, leaving Claudio dumbfounded.

Fritz made a good point, but the frustration over why he had to virtually break his back for the sake of someone he detested reared its head.

Claudio suddenly stopped in his tracks and glanced toward the end of the corridor down which Rosemarie had been carted away. But, not seeing any merit in doing anything, he eventually made his way back into the hall.

Chapter 4: How to Crack a Difficult Heart

Rosemarie loved gardening.

She was the type of child who, whenever she discovered a plant she'd never seen before, would wander off, sending everyone else into a panic.

She always found it mysterious how the seeds sown by her own hands turned into such beautiful flowers. Also mysterious was the fact that these fruitful things would always return to the seeds from whence they came.

Ever since she started seeing human heads as beast heads, her interest grew stronger.

Even when she inevitably went out in public and was scared out of her wits, she would come back to the imperial villa where her ever-silent flower friends would greet and console her.

That was why she paid such respect to the tools she would use to raise said flowers. When she was done using them, she would polish them clean; if they were to break, she would have them repaired. Multi-functional and capable, her tools were extremely reliable.

And, among them, it was her bucket that would help protect her.

She wouldn't see anything once she put it over her head. Even if someone were watching her, she couldn't see them, meaning she could go out without fear. The bucket also blocked sound, so she could go out without hearing anything she didn't want to hear.

The darkness, coupled with the feeling of enclosure where she could only see people by their feet, gave her a sense of relief unlike anything else.

At least, that's how it was until a few days ago.

"Princess, perhaps it's about time to do away with the bucket? At this rate it will fuse to your hand," Heidi said to soothe Rosemarie. But she held down the edges of her bucket headdress with both hands and shook her head in response.

In the corner of her bedroom, and huddled underneath her vanity, Rosemarie had been keeping up her defense since this morning.

Five days had passed since the congratulatory banquet. She had been scared so badly, she'd collapsed pathetically at the banquet. But when she came to and thought things over rationally, she began to feel she may have been too harsh on Claudio.

(Saying that I would have preferred the beast head, saying he

didn't understand my feelings... He isn't the only one who doesn't understand... I don't want to see him...)

He was most certainly furious at her, without a shadow of a doubt. Filled with self-loathing, Rosemarie cooped herself up in her room and put her bucket over her head. But it didn't put her at ease.

"You have an apology present from His Highness here. Admittedly, I'm rather disappointed and curious as to why His Highness himself hasn't graced us with his presence," Heidi said from beside Rosemarie, her tone highly displeased. Of course, her head had turned into a black cat per usual.

Rosemarie would receive gifts of dresses and jewels—things that would make a normal girl jump for joy—along with a message card with an apology written on it almost every day from Claudio, but none of that was enough to move her heart.

(I don't want to leave, but I have to leave... I have to apologize to the prince.)

She thought to herself, but no matter what she tried, her body wouldn't listen to her. Rosemarie clutched her knees and squeezed them tight.

"Today's gift is Kaola. I was told it arrived from Volland just this morning. It came with letters from your family."

"Kaola and letters...?" The word "letters" made Rosemarie perk her head up. Upon hearing that she received letters from her family, all of whom had hurried home after the wedding for fear of leaving the country's borders open for too long, she felt her emotions resurface.

"Yes, letters. They were, well... brought early this morning by Imperial Guard Vice Captain, Squire Clausen. I was told that His Highness used a spell to send away for it, and it was written last night—freshly written and hot off the oven!"

"Hot off the oven...?" She had the feeling that wasn't the right expression to use when dealing with a letter, but as she tried to reach out and take the letter, her hand was caught in Heidi's grasp.

"Ah-ha, so, you'd like to read them, wouldn't you? You'd *reeeally* like to read them, wouldn't you? Well, you can't do much reading if you keep that bucket on your head, you know. So, come now, out of there and off with the bucket!" Heidi pulled on Rosemarie's hand, dragging her out from underneath the vanity. Rosemarie slowly pulled off the bucket to find Heidi standing there holding out the handful of letters with a broad smile across her face.

"And while you read those, I will brew you up some Kaola tea." Pressing the mail Heidi handed to her against her chest with great care, Rosemarie could make out the aroma of brewing Kaola wafting through the air.

While a part of her felt that she should hold off and save the letters for later, Rosemarie sat on her bed and carefully proceeded to read through them.

They started off with well-wishes, but the majority written was about Volland. Written down were her parents' and her sisters' everyday occurrences and the status of the garden of the villa where Rosemarie used to reside.

She felt so homesick by the end of reading them that she wanted to cry. That was when, as if calculated, Heidi presented her with the sweet and piping hot cup of Kaola tea.

"Has that calmed you down any?"

"...Yes, but, now I have the desire to go back to Volland... I want to run off to the villa..."

"Shall we see our way back home? Both parties are sure to be surprised." As Rosemarie saw Heidi come closer, clenching her fists playfully, she wiped her tear-stained eyes as a small smile started to form on her lips. With the cup in hand, Rosemarie gazed at the tea's brown surface and asked, "...The prince sent away for this letter via a spell?"

"It would seem like it. Since you almost never go outside, princess, he must have been at his wits' end and fell back on your parents." It seemed that her anger had decreased, but the pair of black cat ears that popped onto Heidi's head spooked Rosemarie and caused her shoulders to jump.

"Oh, dear. My apologies. I will be back after I calm myself down a tad." Assuming from Rosemarie's reaction that she must look like a beast, Heidi smiled wryly and exited the bedroom.

Rosemarie grasped the cup as she sat all alone in the room.
(But the prince can't even use magic.)

Her guess was that Claudio went to the trouble of asking that melancholy hooded sorcerer, Edeltraud, and sent away for the letters. Which meant he'd asked for Rosemarie's family's cooperation for the sake of her and her shut-in ways. Or, perhaps Claudio himself didn't commission it, but one of his aides had the sense and made the call.

"I think his condition should be worsening again around now, but..." The thought of Edeltraud reminded her: if that sorcerer's statements were correct, then each day Claudio spent without Rosemarie by his side saw his condition worsening. He probably hadn't been getting any sleep, either. However, he hadn't come to forcefully drag her out at all.

She wasn't sure what to think of this—was he being angry and holding his ground? Had he abandoned her? He'd sent away for letters in the midst of all this, which only added to her confusion.

Nevertheless, Rosemarie had finally parted with her bucket and

stepped out of her bedroom on the next day—and on that day, and even the day after that, she continued to receive letters from her family.

“With all due respect, Your Highness. I have suggested this several times, but perhaps it is about time that you deliver the letters to Her Highness personally?” Alto asked from behind Claudio. He took the new letter from Volland from the white hawk perched in the open window of the royal office. The question made Claudio tighten his brows.

‘He is right. You can use me, but if this things keep up like this, the Volland princess will never come out. You won’t be able to test many ways to return your mana to normal. Claudio, you’re being spineless.’

“...Master Edel, I’m going to have the chef fricassee your familiar.” Claudio glared at the talking white hawk, Edeltraud’s familiar. The hawk jumped hurriedly from the windowsill and crumbled out of existence like melting snow.

“This is Mage Edeltraud’s suggestion as well. I have been told that Her Highness has come out from being cooped up in her bedroom to receive the letters. So I believe that you meeting her face-to-face is in order...”

“I’m busy. You deliver it for me.” Flat out denying the suggestion, Claudio pushed the letter over to Alto. On any other day, Alto would have left the room on that. Today, though, he did not take his leave.

“Each time I go to deliver these, I end up receiving some rather biting questions from Her Highness’s maid. Such as, ‘Does His Highness really intend on apologizing?’”

“I do, which is why I’m having letters from her family in Volland being delivered every day. —If that is how this is being perceived, then delivering these is a waste of time. You have training scheduled now, don’t you? I’m sorry for the constant source of trouble.”

Alto threw the letter on the desk in frustration. While he still had it in him to argue his point, he simply lowered his eyebrows, saluted, and left the office.

The room became so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Claudio sat in his chair and breathed a sigh in grand fashion.

How many days had it been since Rosemarie stopped coming out of her room? He hadn’t been able to sleep, and it was hard to breathe. His health was going downhill. Things had been going well for a while, which made the strain on his body feel especially bad.

(Yeah, I sure am *busy*, all right. I just don’t want to meet her face-to-face. I’m the pathetic one here.)

He was the one who had abandoned her on the day of the Imperial Bout, shaking her hand away in rage as she held on for support. Now that he was thinking with a level head, it didn't matter how much of a grudge he had. What he did, he realized now, was inexcusable.

The image of Rosemarie's face frozen in despair flickered in his mind; meeting her eyes was awkward.

He leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling with a hand over one eye, propping his feet on his desk in a flagrant display of poor manners. His throbbing headache was beating against the back of his eyes. Under his hand, he felt a detestable pelt of soft, smooth fur.

—I can see your face as human. You also have the proper texture of human skin. Prince, you are no beast.

Her straightforward and concerned gaze and words caused him to feel a small iota of joy, and it was giving him very mixed feelings. In an outburst of anger, he ended up replying to her by saying that he wasn't asking for an apology and whatnot.

And when he thought back, he realized Rosemarie asked about his condition at every single opportunity.

(She did the same at the evening gala for selecting my bride.)

Even though she didn't have the best complexion in the world herself, she had only been concerned about Claudio. The only girl who had ever shown concern for him, and did so while neither averting her eyes nor being afraid, was Rosemarie.

(Speaking of not averting her eyes... She acted odd after I talked to her about her role in the Imperial Bout...)

She was afraid to participate in the Imperial Bout at first, but she suddenly found the motivation to take up the role for whatever reason. However, in a rare occasion, she did so without looking at Claudio, which is why he remembered. Perhaps he had said something that stimulated a change in her mindset. He had been so fed up with Rosemarie and her scaredy-cat ways that he couldn't even remember what he'd said, but the moment stuck in the corner of his mind.

—Personally, I wouldn't find the fact that you can instantly identify people who harbor animosity cumbersome at all; in fact, I'm envious.

He lifted himself up with a gasp. The momentum caused the chair he had been leaning in to slide, and he toppled over to the floor.

"...Blast it all." Claudio clasped a hand over the spot on his head where it had hit the floor. As if cued by the sound of the chair toppling over, the knight on duty outside the door rushed in.

"Did something happen, sir?!"

"It was nothing. Just tried to pick up a document off the floor and ended up tripping." Claudio stood up, picking up the documents that just so happened to be on the floor in front of him, playing things off

as if nothing transpired. As soon as the relieved knight disappeared past the door, Claudio sat back down in his repositioned chair, ignored the throbbing spot on the back of his head, and leaned his entire arm against the desk to prop up his forehead with his hand.

"I'm a real idiot..." He had snapped when she told him that she would have preferred having a beast head instead. There was no way that she would have understood the hardships that came from that. There was no way he could find joy in hearing someone say they envied that. The same presumably went for Rosemarie. No matter how fainthearted she was, it was natural that she would have been angry.

He dropped his gaze down to the letter he sent for from Volland.

Stroking his face to iron out the tense wrinkles in his forehead, he picked up the letter.

"—Suppose I'll deliver it later," Claudio murmured to himself, as if he had made up his mind. He carefully put the white envelope away in his breast pocket and resumed his work.

"Is that true?" From within the small, isolated confessional in the palace's chapel, Archbishop Kastner responded to the court lady sitting across from him, a joyful expression on his face.

"Yes, His Highness has been flying a bird toward Volland every day as of late, but it is a familiar spirit of the Archmagus."

"And you're certain of that?"

"Yes, it is seldom used, but I have seen them bring it along in the past. That white hawk belongs to Archmagus Edeltraud," the court lady declared, and Kastner couldn't contain the smile on his face.

A sorcerer's familiar spirit would never take form with someone else. That was why, unless what the court lady was saying was incorrect, the white hawk was not being tamed by Claudio.

It was understandable if the familiar was going back and forth between Claudio and Edeltraud, but the destination in question was Volland. Not only that, but with it being a daily event, it made him wonder why Claudio didn't just use his own familiar.

It would have been impossible that Prince Claudio, the greatest sorcerer in all of Baltzar, didn't have a familiar spirit of his own. One could easily create a familiar if they had the mana to do so. However, Kastner had realized all too late that he had not seen Claudio do that even once.

"There might be some sort of issue with Prince Claudio's mana." The ever-fastidious Claudio had finally shown a chink in his proverbial armor after all this time. A little investigation into this matter could produce some intriguing results.

As a condition to accede the throne of this country, one is required

to have mana of the highest caliber. While it apparently had relevance to the Forbidden Forest, he was convinced that it was nothing to really pay any mind.

Word had it that, unlike his son's, King Baltzar's mana was quite insignificant.

In this country that was teeming with sorcerers, the state church held little clout. While they didn't undermine the church, it had made for some bitter experiences on countless occasions. Men of the mystic robe and men of the holy cloth don't see eye to eye. Their conflicting ideologies were a common topic, not just in Baltzar, but everywhere.

That was the very reason Kastner was trying to kick that threatening upstart Claudio out of his princely position and develop a candidate for crown price that was backed by the church.

"After all, being under the rule of a disfigured king is quite unbearable." Claudio may have been called the second coming of the sacred beast and regarded in awe, but there was no shortage of people who despised him. Just like the court lady nodding deeply right before Kastner's eyes.

Kastner had a feeling that delving into this new intelligence would prove to be in his favor, and his lips slowly curled into a smile.

The envelope that Claudio shoved at Rosemarie made her blink in shock and disbelief.

"Hurry up and take it. If you don't want it, I'll dispose of it," Claudio asserted with a blunt yet peevish expression, upon which she rushed to take the letter from his hand.

Claudio's sudden visit to Rosemarie's lounge had happened just as the sun was setting, and just as she was starting to fear she hadn't received a letter from Volland that day.

"Thank you very much!" Rosemarie smiled broadly, giddy and overjoyed that Claudio had hand-delivered the letter she was convinced she wouldn't be getting. At that, Claudio frowned and quickly averted his eyes. His complexion was a little worse than she had thought.

"Well, look who's full of cheer. I went through all the trouble of sending for letters out of concern for you, but it seems that wasn't necessary. Do you find hassling me that enjoyable?"

"That isn't what I..." Her shoulders slumped at Claudio's sharp remarks and, upon seeing his expression in profile, she held her tongue.

(He isn't angry, is he? He sort of looks troubled, actually...)

It might have been apt to say his expression looked uncomfortable. She stared at Claudio intently, unable to gauge his emotions. As

she did, Claudio finally turned her way, frowning his brow in a manner that seemed just on the edge of sullen. Her eyes darted around the room.

“... So, err, yes...” Claudio opened and closed his mouth over and over, as though giving up on something mid-thought. In the end, he said nothing and turned his back on her. Realizing that he was about to leave, Rosemarie instinctively grabbed his sleeve.

“Um, Prince, I...” She needed to apologize. That genuine desire drove her to open her mouth, but the words wouldn’t come out. She wanted to apologize but, rather frustratingly, found she couldn’t. Maybe Claudio was feeling the same way a moment ago?

“If you have the energy to rejoice over this letter, then maybe it’s time for you to come out of here. —It’s your fault I’m doing so poorly,” Claudio asserted in a monotone, shaking off Rosemarie’s hand and exiting the room. Once he exited, Rosemarie was robbed of her energy in one fell swoop and sank limply into the cushion of the sofa.

“Are you all right, princess?”

“...Yes, I was just a little nervous.” Heidi came to Rosemarie’s side from her post in the corner of the room and began stroking her shoulders to console her. This gave her the incentive to reply.

“Nevertheless, it seems he didn’t apologize after all. Admittedly, he seemed like he was going to, at least.” Heidi sighed in disappointment, a hand on her cheek, as Rosemarie’s gaze fell on the letter Claudio had brought her.

Between him personally delivering the letter he’d sent for from Volland, his high-handed threat to “dispose of it,” and his apparent desire to apologize, Claudio was hard to figure out.

(Do I want him to apologize?)

She didn’t feel like that was the case. After all, she had said plenty of rude things to Claudio herself.

She should have been happy that he came to deliver the letter, but the fact that he brought it killed her motivation to read it right away. Instead, she stared at it closely. Then there was a knock at the door. Heidi answered it in trained fashion.

“Oh, my, Squire Clausen. If you’re looking for His Highness, he has already made his return.”

On the other side of the open door stood Alto, Claudio’s ever-trustworthy aide.

“Oh, His Highness was here?”

“Yes, he came to deliver the letter,” Heidi replied dubiously to Alto, who seemed to be shocked. He lowered his eyes in contemplation, then gave his thanks and departed. However, Rosemarie sensed something out of place with the knight and hailed him down.

“Wait a moment, please, Squire Clausen. You didn’t know that the prince was making a visit here?” She had assumed that Claudio had told him that he was bringing the letter himself today.

“... That is correct, milady. I was unaware.”

“If so, why did you make your way here, Squire Clausen?”

“Well...” Alto was being oddly inarticulate, but Rosemarie waited for what he had to say without rushing him, which led to him confessing in resignation.

“I have been suggesting to His Highness that he deliver the letters to you personally for the past few days now, but he would refuse the suggestion every single time. I have been delivering them in his stead. However, today I was more persistent in holding my ground, which ended up making His Highness quite upset. I couldn’t make His Highness entrust the letter to me. And I would have felt awful if you never received the letter you had been so eagerly awaiting because of me. So, I’d actually come to check on the situation and apologize.” Rosemarie saw Alto lower his shoulders, crestfallen, leaving her to simply stare at the floor wordlessly.

(So, the prince didn’t come and deliver this letter of his own accord... And here I was so happy, too.)

However, the only one in the room who wasn’t remaining silent was Heidi.

“Then, are you saying that his attempts at apologizing were because he was told by someone else?! I’m sorry if this comes across as rude, but His Highness is a little pathetic—”

Interrupting Heidi, whose revealed anger manifested as turning her head into a black cat, Rosemarie looked at Alto. Despite her harsh words about Claudio, though, he didn’t seem displeased. The knight’s face remained human and he simply smiled bitterly.

“The good maid’s anger is not unreasonable. However, I am sure that he realizes that he has done a horrible thing to you, Your Highness. It may just be that His Highness is so overwrought about the fact that you stole his mana that he cannot find it in himself to apologize easily. I believe I have made mention before as well, but His Highness does not normally act in such a way.”

“—Yes... I believe you. All of his retainers worship him, after all...” Rosemarie slowly lowered her gaze, not convinced.

“Your Highness, may I have a small word with you?” Alto asked, sounding hopeful for a response in the positive, so Rosemarie nodded silently.

“Because of His Highness’s appearance, he must be stronger than and far superior to anyone else. Otherwise, he might have the rug pulled from under him and even lose his life if he makes the wrong decision. He must work more than the average man.” Alto mournfully

knitted his brow. Rosemarie hung her head, feeling cornered. While Alto may not have intended to criticize her, there was a subservient side of her that took his words that way. She hated it.

“His Highness is normally extremely on guard. His rash remarks may have been a case of him being comfortable with you, considering you’re aware of the breadth of the situation. However, he is a kind individual at heart.” As Rosemarie listened to what Alto said, her final delirious vision of Claudio in his youth crossed her mind.

(I wonder if that was a memory from when he saved me while I was lost in the Forbidden Forest...)

Assuming that it really happened, that would have meant that he came searching for a child he didn’t even know, but she couldn’t really trust her own memory.

He was so cruel when she was taken to his office, and he was usually so curt and scowled at her when they weren’t in public.

Rosemarie clenched her hands into tight fists, determined.

“Um, Squire Clausen, I have a request. —Would you mind telling me the prince’s schedule for tomorrow?”

“No, I would not mind, but... might you be planning to pay him a visit?”

“Oh, no... Um, not exactly. It’s more like observation from afar.”

Alto’s eyes widened in shock. Heidi stood with her mouth agape in bewilderment. The two of them fixed their eyes upon Rosemarie. Their gazes being too much to handle, she held her face down.

“I would like to see the prince as he normally is. He is always so ill-tempered when he is around me, you see...” If she watched from afar, there was a chance she would get a good glimpse into what kind of individual Claudio really was. Even if his decision today was at the advice of another, the one who decided to bring the letter to her personally was Claudio. Which meant that, this time, it was her turn to take action.

“If that is the case, I shall gladly make arrangements for you!” Alto shouted in complete shock, a broad smile on his face. Rosemarie pulled back from his overly enthusiastic display, but nearby Heidi gave her a little pat on the shoulders.

“Princess, I am very pleased that you have your mind set on going outside, of course, but... What does he mean by ‘you stole his mana’?”

“Oh...” Rosemarie looked at Heidi with her sweet smile as she slowly transformed into a black cat, noticing that her trusted maid had absolutely no idea about the matters surrounding Claudio. She then tried to piece together an explanation while going pale in the face.

The sky seemed ready to burst into a downpour at any minute as Rosemarie looked up at it, clenching her hands as they shivered with nervousness.

“Claudio on the move. Let’s go.” Edeltraud, who had been watching the main street hidden in the shadows of a building, gave a wave of their hand as a signal to come over.

As Rosemarie followed the gloomy mage in the familiar hood, her feet unsteady as she went, she held her chest and let out a sigh. She was dressed in a white blouse and a blue skirt that she borrowed from Heidi—the same Heidi that she explained everything to with some help from Alto yesterday. And, as expected, through her black cat’s mouth, she asked, “May I go and wring His Highness’s royal neck?”

(Why am I here in the city...? If I go by what we discussed yesterday, I should have been watching the prince conducting his Imperial Guard training from afar, shouldn’t I?)

Since she wasn’t able to observe Claudio from afar while he was in his office, the plan was to watch him in secret while he did his Imperial Guard training, but that ended up shifting gears to patrolling the city behind the castle walls.

That being the case, Edeltraud took her down there, also acting as her bodyguard, per Alto’s request. But, to be frank, Rosemarie didn’t have the best impression of the sorcerer after the whole fiasco with them trapping and carting her around in that glass orb.

(He really doesn’t seem to notice us, but... Ironic I have a spell cast over me despite having a trait that absorbs mana.)

When they left the castle, Edeltraud had cast a camouflage spell over her. It was apparently something where people would know she was around, but they wouldn’t pay her any mind.

Walking through the streets was something she had never done before—not even in Volland. She figured that she would be too afraid to even walk around, but knowing that she wasn’t being noticed put her mind at ease.

She followed Edeltraud as they walked through the considerably populated street, making sure not to lose sight of them. Considering that she was a sponge for mana, she would have to ask them to hold her hand so that she wouldn’t get lost—something which she couldn’t find it in herself to do. Instead, she followed close behind like her life depended on it.

“See over there?” The sorcerer suddenly stopped in their tracks and pointed. Looking over to where their finger guided, she saw several tents pitched in the square on the other side of the main street. The Imperial Guards, all clad in black uniforms, were walking there as a unit.

“What are those tents about?”

“You don’t know about the marketplace?”

She shook her head at Edeltraud, who was genuinely perplexed. While she had heard stories of a place that sold various foodstuffs and everyday accessories, she had naturally never seen one in person.

“Feel up to going?” Edeltraud asked Rosemarie in a tone that was considerate, yet still emotionless. Even looking at the crowded marketplace from a distance, she caught glimpses of people with beast heads.

“—I will go,” she replied raspily, forcing the words out from a throat bone-dry with fear. Edeltraud gave her a simple nod of their head.

“Okay, got it. Hold the ends of my clothes, then.” Maybe this was Edeltraud’s way of showing good intentions. Still feeling guilty for considering them an eerie individual, she held tightly to the ends of the sorcerer’s robe.

“You, sir, over there! Got some quality goods here, quality goods! If y’don’t buy now, yer missin’ out!”

“If you buy three, I’ll knock down the price for ya, ma’am.”

“Why not take this home to the spouse? The fabric’s from across the border in Rivera.”

Rosemarie set her resolve and rushed into the marketplace crowd. Voices passed by her ears one after the other, and although it was dizzying, her eyes widened over the wide array of unique items for sale.

There were black fruits and beautiful rainbow-colored fabrics that she had never seen before. There were even shops that sold birds in a plethora of colors. However, out of all the people and shop owners gathered there, there were mysteriously not that many of them that had beast heads, despite it being far more crowded than the evening gala at the royal palace.

“Why don’t they have beast heads...?”

“Animosity, when you come someplace this fun, gets forgotten. Anyway, look.” After receiving a reply to her whispered question, Rosemarie looked where Edeltraud directed. There, in a slightly open area of the square, the Imperial Guards were all amassed with Claudio at the front.

“Claudio sometimes come out to the masses. So he doesn’t scare them. Necessary action.”

“So, that is the reason why they are going on patrol even though they are the Imperial Guard...” Upon closer inspection, she saw some people who didn’t hesitate to approach Claudio, while others looked at him timidly en masse from afar. The latter group contained mostly beast heads.

“My *stars*, he really *does* have a lion’s head.”

“Is that the crown prince? How fearsome.”

“That is the curse of the sacred beast, isn’t it?”

She overheard a woman talking with a few other people, mostly about Claudio’s appearance. Since Claudio’s head didn’t register as a lion’s to Rosemarie’s eyes, she had almost forgotten that fact. But the clamor around her quickly reminded her.

It was one of the few times she felt hate, not fear, for the people with beast heads.

(If I hadn’t stolen his mana, people wouldn’t even have to hate him, nor would he have to do so much extra work for no reason.)

In the midst of Rosemarie’s fit of self-deprecation, a group of kids came running up to Claudio as he engaged in smiling conversation with those who approached him.

“Prince Claudio, your whiskers look so amazing!”

“Amazing? I am happy to hear that.”

“So pretty! Soft and fluffy, too. Can I touch?”

“Yes, go ahead. Can you reach?”

Upon seeing Claudio bending down to entertain the unknown child’s wishes, the heads of several of the people watching from afar reverted back to human form by ones and twos.

“Their heads are reverting back...”

“Are they? Then, no doubt about it. Claudio been constantly on patrol ever since head turned into lion. Been making people well aware of his appearance.”

Rosemarie tightened her fist as she heard Edeltraud’s soft, affectionate voice by her side.

Just as Alto had said, Claudio was strong, both mentally and physically. Anyone else would have lost the desire to see others if their head was disfigured, knowing they would be feared or shunned as strange. However, he didn’t settle for that. He accepted the way he looked and considered his options on how to remove that sense of disgust.

(And for me?)

Rosemarie had rejected everything in fear, keeping herself cooped up in the villa so she could neither see nor hear anything. All without once considering how she could improve the situation.

It was no small wonder why Claudio was so upset at her.

She felt something cold hit her forehead out of nowhere. Without even needing to come back to reality and look up, she saw rain come trickling down from the lead-gray sky. The shoppers that had been enjoying their experience in the marketplace all started running in panic.

“Let’s go back.” Edeltraud lightly tugged at the robe that Rosemarie had gripped in her hands.

“Right, back to the—” Rosemarie said and nodded, but cut off her sentence partway. Sure enough, she had caught sight of Claudio and his men in the midst of making their way through the now pouring rain. The people that had gathered around started to part ways in search of shelter from the rain. One person, however, with a gray dog head, went against the crowd and made a fierce dash toward Claudio. In his hands, with a cold, sharp glint—was a sword.

“Prince!” Rosemarie shouted, and Claudio turned around at about the same time. The gray dog-headed person charged forward with intent to stab. —That was when a strong wind gusted from next to Rosemarie.

“...?!” Rosemarie had closed her eyes in reaction to the wind, but when it finally died down and she opened them, she saw the dog-headed man being held and subdued by Claudio.

“Mm-hmm, have to stay on guard, after all.” Hearing the emotionless voice by her side, Rosemarie looked at the sorcerer, puzzled.

“That wind, was... that, by any chance, a spell you cast?”

“Just a little. Oh, got found out.” While Edeltraud’s voice didn’t have a trace of panic, Rosemarie coiled herself up in fear. She looked toward Claudio timidly and the color faded from her face. Claudio left the assailant to Alto and the other Imperial Guards, and strode over to Rosemarie and Edeltraud with long steps.

“Master Edel, I see that you followed me today.”

“Yes. Had a bad feeling.”

Rosemarie poked her head out from behind Edeltraud, whom she’d chosen as a hiding place at the last second. Since she still had the camouflage spell cast upon her, she knew that he didn’t know that she was there, but it still stressed her out regardless.

She locked eyes with Claudio, who looked surprised. Her heart skipped a beat, but Edeltraud stepped in quickly.

“Something wrong? See someone you know?”

“—No, seems that it was just my imagination.” He slightly paused before his response.

(Did we meet eyes? I don’t *think* that should be possible, but...)

Trying to contain the area around her palpitating heart, Rosemarie was left wondering on the inside.

“Looks like heavy rain is in store. You should get back home,” was all that Claudio said before quickly turning his back to the two and returning to the group of Imperial Guards.

“Let’s go.” Edeltraud started to walk and Rosemarie followed in suit. She clapped a hand over her chest, attempting to calm her heart after slipping past Claudio’s notice.

By the time they made it off the streets, the rainfall had gotten

into full swing. Once they loaded themselves into the carriage that Alto had arranged for them, it quickly took off. In the driver's seat was perched Edeltraud's white hawk familiar. Rosemarie hadn't believed it when she heard the familiar would be driving the carriage, so she was in for a perplexing surprise when the vehicle actually started moving.

The sounds of upturned soil and rainwater hitting the carriage reverberated within the cramped enclosure. Edeltraud sat across from Rosemarie with their head leaning on the window, not budging an inch.

"Um, that ruffian from before, was he..."

"That always happens. Claudio has many allies, many enemies. Not a big deal, I assure you." The specifics were sort of muddled via Edeltraud's explanation, but the point was probably that he couldn't keep his guard down.

"Anyway, Claudio, how was he?"

"—He seemed in bad shape." She couldn't have been sure without a closer look, but he would give an occasional grimace of pain. Even from a distance, she could tell his complexion was poor, which meant he was likely in bad health.

She knew that wasn't what Edeltraud was asking, but it was all she was able to give by way of a response. There were too many things for her to think about, and she wasn't doing a good job at organizing them.

"Just as figured. Claudio hates showing vulnerable side. Doesn't really like showing his retainers, either." A sigh spilled out of the sorcerer's mouth.

(Ah-ha, so that just might be why he has been extra hard on me...)

After all, having someone worry or show care for you meant showing your vulnerabilities.

If she hadn't traveled outside and checked in on Claudio's condition, she wouldn't have known that—she wouldn't have even known that he was going through all this effort in the first place.

At the same time, trying to get Claudio to understand her, the reclusive scaredy-cat who didn't speak her mind, seemed like a lost cause. Of course she couldn't get him to understand her. Claudio hadn't been around her since childhood like Heidi or her family, after all.

(Once I get back, I need to offer a proper apology. Even if he doesn't accept it.)

She squeezed her hands tightly in her lap.

"But you are Claudio's lover. Sure you can make it—"

Suddenly, the carriage shook violently. Edeltraud promptly took Rosemarie into their arms as she almost rolled out of her seat.

The frame of the carriage leaned and went on a slant with a clunk,

leading to a noisy crash and eventual silence.

“What just...” Rosemarie got up to find Edeltraud, who had helped shield her from the impact, and saw their arm lying limp on the floor. Maybe they took a blow to the head, but they were completely unconscious.

“Mage Edeltraud!” She knew that she probably shouldn’t be shaking them, but she gave them a light shake anyway and she was met with a low groan. Upon hearing that, she breathed a sigh of relief. As she tried to get up and survey the situation outside through the cracked window, the sorcerer grabbed her by the arm.

“No. Don’t leave.”

“Huh?” The moment she questioned the instruction, the sounds of footsteps on the muddy road could be heard outside the carriage. She gasped audibly, proceeding to slide the still-downed Edeltraud across the floor to hide them.

A person’s face poked through the cracked window. They were backlit, so she couldn’t make out any features, but she could tell it was a large person.

“Ain’t nobody inside. Guess we were off-target. Figured that we’d get a nice haul with a carriage goin’ to the castle, but guess not.”

“If the driver ain’t there, issit a sorcerer’s carriage? Man oh man, whatta waste.”

There was a group of men chatting among each other. Judging from what they were talking about, it was safe to assume they were bandits.

(It’s okay, it’s okay. I’m under that camouflage spell, so they won’t notice me.)

She clasped her shivering hands together and prayed that they wouldn’t find the two of them. It begged the question—why was it that her very first excursion outside ended up being such a huge disaster? It was just as she suspected. If Edeltraud was involved, no good was to follow.

Eventually, it seemed her prayers were answered. After the men wandered around the perimeter of the carriage for a bit, they left the area, taking only the horse.

“—They’re gone. We’re safe now.”

The presences of the men receded. Rosemarie went to give Edeltraud some help as they got back to their feet, but quickly jerked their hand back.

“Oh, um, will your mana be okay? I didn’t steal any when you shielded me from the fall, did I...?”

“It’s fine. Mm-hmm, now I see. —Congratulations.”

“Excuse me?”

After opening and closing their own hand, Edeltraud extended a

congratulatory word for some odd reason. Edeltraud's gloved hand grabbed Rosemarie's hand, making the girl go instantly pale. Had the sorcerer hit their head that hard?

"Unless skin makes direct contact, mana remains unstolen. Coincidental discovery, but incredible one." Their face went hidden as usual in spite of them moving around so much, but it was clear that they were in high spirits. She knew what this meant. They were probably the type that couldn't care less about anything else when spells and magic were the subjects at hand.

"If we knew what circumstances were when you stole from Claudio... Yeah, could work. Then again, that..." Edeltraud murmured to herself as Rosemarie slumped her shoulders. Continuing to wallow in her own crippling fear wasn't going to get her anywhere.

"Um, Mage Edeltraud?"

"Edel will do. Name too long, too tiring."

"Okay, Mage... Edel? Are you sure you aren't injured? Will you be able to make it to the castle on foot?" She wasn't sure where they actually were, but they passed by the woods on their way from the castle to the town near the castle. If those bandits were hiding anywhere, those woods were the most likely spot. Still, though, it was perplexing as to why bandits would crop up near the castle.

"Back on foot? Why? Claudio will pass here soon. Sure of that. Make any unwise moves and run into lot from earlier, bound for trouble."

"Yes, but if the prince doesn't notice us like those people from earlier..." Edeltraud cocked their head in confusion, filling Rosemarie with uneasiness as she started to trail off.

"Don't worry. Claudio been able to see you. Probably because of you having Claudio's mana. Reason why no need to worry. He will notice you."

"...Huh?" Earlier, she had thought they met eyes. Was Edeltraud basically saying that she had been right all along? If that were the case, why didn't Claudio question her right there on the spot? Nevertheless, that feeling of impatience that those doubts were stirring up made Rosemarie draw closer to Edeltraud.

"That is even more reason for us to get back. He will surely scold me!" If Claudio found out that she took initiative to go out and trail him just to end up getting raided by bandits, it would unquestionably fuel his anger that much more.

But there was no convincing Edeltraud; the sorcerer brushed the whole thing off, saying it would be "okay." So Rosemarie could do nothing save feel at a loss as she sat inside the slanted, rain-pelted carriage.

Footsteps filled with anger echoed throughout the polished corridor of the royal castle. Claudio wasn't running, but his steps were by no means slow. He was heading toward a certain room at that particular pace.

"Your Highness, please wait! This is not Her Highness's fault. All of us instigated her to do so." A nervous-looking Alto caught up to Claudio from behind, but the prince maintained his pace nonetheless. (Instigated? Agreeing is agreeing, nonetheless.)

He was flabbergasted upon spotting Rosemarie behind Edeltraud in the middle of the streets. And welling up at the same time was another emotion: anger. He gave himself credit for quickly discerning that condemning her in the middle of the street would have caused a scene, however.

After sending Rosemarie and Edeltraud back to the castle and leaving the assailant in the custody of the knights on patrol, he talked to Alto on the way back to the castle. Alto finally confessed to conspiring with Rosemarie, bringing her out into the city so she could observe Claudio.

Needless to say, that got under his skin.

When he arrived at Rosemarie's room, he spotted her maid pacing to and fro in front of the door in an uncomposed manner. Heidi noticed Claudio and ran up to him with a frantic expression.

"Your Highness! Squire Clausen! Is the princess not with you?!"

"What do you mean?" he asked back to Heidi in a low tone, the look on his face changing.

"The Princess hasn't come back. It is raining outside and already getting dark..."

Claudio's eyes widened in shock.

If he'd encountered Rosemarie, he intended to tell her to ask him anything she might want to know directly, rather than being underhanded and watching stealthily from the shadows.

However, Rosemarie was not here. Her usual gaze of concern over him was nowhere to be seen.

An uneasy sweat dotted his brow. His throat immediately went dry and, despite not having exerted himself, his heart was beating like crazy.

(What is this? Am I feeling a sense of uneasiness? This is the girl who stole my mana we're talking about here.)

He tried to squeeze his fists to calm himself down, but it did just the opposite, heightening his impatience instead.

(Wait a second. I haven't apologized yet.)

If he'd known this was going to happen, he would have just

apologized right away when he came by to deliver that letter.

Had he just done that, he wouldn't have to cope with all this guilt, or loss, or whatever it was he was experiencing.

"Your Highness?" Alto asked curiously. Claudio realized that he had stopped talking and snapped back to his senses.

"She should be with Master Edel. No need to worry like that. Just in case, I will go and search the area. Wait here in her room in the meantime and stay calm." He watched as Heidi nodded her head over and over, on the verge of tears. Then he turned away from her.

He returned the way he came, the thought of a crash slowing their return down running through his mind.

(This is odd. It's a straight path from the city back to here. Timewise, it'd be unlikely that we'd miss running into one another. Did something happen?)

He assured Heidi that she had no reason to worry so long as Rosemarie was with Edeltraud. But if anything, her being with Edeltraud and this happening anyway made him feel the gravity of the situation.

"Your Highness, we shall go in search. You need your rest..."

"I don't want to make matters worse. You alone accompanying me should suffice."

"But sir, you have a military assembly dinner scheduled after this."

"It's mostly going to be a bunch of trite bragging about their military exploits, anyway. Tell them I'll be late." He hadn't noticed that he was losing his cool. No, it was more like he noticed and was ignoring it.

Just thinking about the potential danger Rosemarie might've been facing would have made it extremely hard to sit through something so annoying.

(If it is gone, then I can't get back my mana.)

That is what Claudio told himself, at least, as they headed toward the stable. He felt bad for the horses, who had barely been put away without a chance to rest, but they brought them out anyway and rode off. He gave detailed instructions to the soldiers guarding the castle gates to keep their lips sealed.

The rain that started in the evening was still falling, and things were getting dark now that the sun had almost completely set. Claudio and Alto rode their horses while being careful not to get their feet caught in the mud.

"Shall we search the way we came?"

"Yes, let's do that for the time being." Claudio met Alto's question from beside him with a nod. The two proceeded on their way, being careful to leave no stone unturned.

The woods filling the space from the Forbidden Forest in the back

of the castle covered a side of the path leading up to the castle. It was like a black wave encroaching on the area.

Claudio clicked his tongue in annoyance at how bad the visibility was. That was when something white slid past the corner of his eyes. Claudio locked on to whatever it was with his eyes. What he found was a plain carriage unnaturally stopped on the side of the road.

(I don't remember this being here the first time we passed through... It's really hard to believe that we'd find them so easily.)

Claudio thought that, suspicious, but he started slowing down his horse, nevertheless.

The neighing of horses could be heard, and Rosemarie, who had been sitting on the slanted passenger seat clutching her knees, lifted her downcast head.

"They're here," Edeltraud, curled up as Rosemarie was, announced.

Edeltraud had insisted that Claudio would come find them. But the time they'd waited, combined with the encroaching dark, only heightened Rosemarie's worry that they'd be stuck there all night.

She went to approach the cracked window, but hesitated. What if it wasn't Claudio or one of the knights out there? That thought crossed her mind, and her courage to peek outside diminished. As she sat there conflicted, she heard the sound of feet treading the wet ground. She thought she saw the silhouette of someone in the cracked window, but before she could process it, there was a violent knocking at the door.

"We're looking for someone. Would you mind if we search the inside?" Rosemarie was met with an all-too-familiar deep and annoyed voice. Every drop of blood in her body was pumping in joy. Before she could even crawl on the toppled over seat toward the window, the door opened up.

In the next instant, her vision started to warp and distort. The toppled seat that she had been crawling on went upright, as well as the doorway that she had been looking up at this entire time. The pieces of broken window scattered across the floor faded away in the blink of an eye, and the window returned to pristine condition. Even though the carriage was supposed to be flipped on its side with its horses stolen, it went back to looking as good as new—almost as if nothing had happened.

"Huh...?"

"—Rosemarie!"

Rosemarie blinked in surprise as the rain-soaked Claudio entered her sight. His appearance overlapped with the frantic expression of

Claudio in his youth that crossed her mind when she last passed out.

“...?!” Her brain wasn’t able to catch up with her—not because of the mysterious phenomenon that had occurred before her eyes, but because of the arms that reached out and hugged her tightly.

“I swear, do you have any idea what you’ve done? I thought you showed up in town because you dragged Alto and Master Edel into your plan, but then you didn’t even come back to the castle? Your maid was practically on the verge of a breakdown.” Despite his scolding, Claudio’s hands around Rosemarie’s shoulders didn’t loosen up one bit. Eventually, Rosemarie tapped hesitantly on Claudio’s back, short of breath.

“I’m sorry, Prince, but it’s a little hard to breathe.”

“Silence. —Consider it your punishment for putting me through so much trouble.”

“—I-I’m very sorry about that...”

Despite him saying it was a punishment, his voice was tinged in relief. As she thought that her insides were going to actually pop out from the constricting force around her body, she heard a rather carefree yawn from behind them.

“Claudio, you’re late. Had stage all set up, but Volland princess was getting all the more suspicious.”

“Stage all set up...?” There was a set of words in that sentence that she couldn’t help but fixate on. Now that Claudio had loosened his grip on Rosemarie, she turned her head around. There, she saw the sorcerer rotating their shoulders to limber up their stiffened body.

“Volland princess doesn’t return to castle, Claudio stops procrastinating and takes action.”

“Huh? Um, what do you mean by that? Those bandits...”

“Bandits? What do you mean? Explain yourselves.” The incomprehensible and hesitant words coming from Rosemarie’s mouth sparked Claudio to react in turn. He squeezed her shoulders tightly.

“We were assaulted by bandits. The carriage was destroyed and the horse was stolen away...”

“Uh, come again? Nothing here is destroyed. The horse is there, too, hitched to the carriage as it should be.” The two of them looked at one another, bewildered. Edeltraud, solidifying the fact that they were undeniably strange and unusual, started to chuckle to themselves.

“Hee hee, prince comes to rescue princess in distress and falls in love. Tale old as time. Once person they care about not being around, come to find out their importance. Also old as time. Bandits and carriage being destroyed an illusion. Everything a lie. Well? Have fun?”

Rosemarie stood with her mouth agape and it stayed that way.

Edeltraud had their face covered by the hood of their robe, so even if they were telling a lie and they had a beast head, she wouldn't have been able to see it. She had been completely blindsided.

Edeltraud had been pulling the strings on her the entire time. She felt more languid than upset over the whole thing.

However, it seemed that Claudio begged to differ. As soon as Claudio took his hands off of Rosemarie's shoulders, he drew his sword, its blade meant for Edeltraud.

"No, Prince! Mage Edel, please get yourself out of here!"

Claudio's expression was akin to the devil himself. Clinging to his arm, she tried desperately to stop him from bringing the blade down. Regardless, Edeltraud was not scared in the least, and seemed to actually be enjoying all of this as they jumped out the door opposite the one Claudio opened.

"Mend things up. Will you? Next time might not end up lie. Got it?" Without forgetting to drive the point home with a warning, Edeltraud vanished into the darkness. The horse neighed in surprise.

The moment the target of his aggression had vanished, Claudio sheathed his sword with the same force he used to draw it out. He then put his hand over his face and plopped himself down on the carriage seat.

"Alto, will this carriage move?" Claudio called.

"Yes, I cannot seem to spot any issues with it. And, well... Mage Edeltraud left their familiar in the driver's seat. Also, they rode off with your horse as well, Your Highness..." Alto, who had apparently followed along, replied in a hesitant manner.

"God, my teacher can never mind their business..." Claudio grumbled under his breath, but he closed the door to the carriage and tapped on the wall to the driver's seat twice with the handle of his sword, signaling them to drive.

When she felt the carriage start to move, Rosemarie hurried to take her seat again. An exhausted Claudio slouched in the seat across from her, a single hand on his forehead. Seeing him like this was stimulating a sense of guilt and panic that told her she needed to do something, so she impulsively opened her mouth.

"Um, Prince?"

"—What?"

"Would you like to rest your head on my lap?"

"..." He silently scowled at her.

"I mean, um, if you dislike resting your head on my lap, then shall we hold hands? From what I understand, it's my fault that you're as tired as you are..." she said, her speech escalated by her tension. Claudio furrowed his brow, baffled.

"Weren't you being angry at me?"

"I thought that *you* were being angry at *me*, Prince. Weren't you?"

Silence descended. As she stared intently at him, Claudio sighed deeply and moved himself over to Rosemarie's side. Then, not a word traveled from his mouth.

"Um..."

"—Give me your hand."

"Right away!" Just as she was ordered in a low tone by Claudio, who was feeling the fatigue run through him, she put both of her hands onto the palm he held out in front of her. Claudio then gave her a side-eyed glare.

"Why did you give me both hands? What are you, a dog? What am I thinking? If you were a dog, you waltzing away from your owner would be—"

Rosemarie quickly jerked one of her hands away as she meekly accepted Claudio's scolding. The sudden pause in his sentence was enough to make her suspicious, and she stared at his side profile intently. She could see it wrenching in distress.

"...I swear, I'm starting to hate this. Every time I see your face, the harsh language spills from my mouth. And I was in such a panic over you just a second ago, too." Claudio gently clasped Rosemarie's remaining hand in his own. His felt cold to the touch, probably because of the rain, which startled her. She once again held his hand with both of hers, but, this time, he didn't try to brush them aside.

"—I will admit that I was angry. But what I felt in the moment I heard that you hadn't returned to the castle wasn't anger—it was *panic*." Claudio's expression took a sad turn as he faced away from Rosemarie. Maybe that was why he was sitting next to her right now: he didn't want her to see his face from the front.

"I tried to convince myself that I was in such a panic because I wouldn't be able to get my mana back if you were gone, but as soon as I saw your face a moment ago, I knew that I was wrong. —In that moment, I didn't give a damn about my mana. You were safe. That alone was enough to sincerely put my mind at ease." Claudio gripped his hand tighter around Rosemarie's. It almost felt like he was condensing his feelings into the hand he had a painful hold upon. Rosemarie hung her head, feeling bewilderment in her mind and a warmth in her chest at the same time.

"So, yes... If I'm wrong, then tell me that I am. Were you angry because I said that I was envious of your ability to see animosity?"

Rosemarie gasped and lifted her head to find Claudio with an expression that showed how difficult this was for him to ask. She then clutched at her chest with her free hand.

"May I ask you, Prince... are you happy when someone tells you that they are envious of your head being a lion?"

“There’s no way that I would be. There are more shortcomings than advantages. It puts me through unnecessary hell.”

“Yes, I would assume. ...Your lion head is the same as my eyes. Which is why you telling me you envied them made me sad,” she said, coming to a new realization herself. As to why it made her so mad, as to why it made her so sad. It was because she felt selfishly betrayed by Claudio, whom she had believed was going through a similar kind of hell.

“So, I was right. I see... Well, I’m... well, sorry.” In the window on the opposite side of Claudio, Rosemarie could see his lion head reflected in the glass. His fine pelt was wet with rainwater, and just like the human face that only she saw, it looked somewhat dispirited.

“Please, don’t apologize. You really don’t have to. I don’t believe I have the right to be angry at you, seeing as how you have been working so hard to make up for my faults despite me not doing anything in return.” Drops of water fell from the tips of Claudio’s soaking hair.

“Plus, I apparently ran into you when I was a child. But since I cannot remember what happened back then, it should be *me* who apologizes to *you*.”

Claudio’s eyes widened in surprise as she took a handkerchief out of her breast pocket and pressed it against his wet cheeks. While he would have made her stop any other day in the past, this time around, he clasped her hand around hers.



“...I hope you know that you are far too softhearted. No, maybe I have it flipped around? You’re not even allowing me to apologize to you, after all.” Claudio smiled in a rather self-deprecating manner, but Rosemarie shook her head.

“You would call me by name on occasion before the wedding, but you haven’t called me by name once ever since.”

However, most likely because he couldn’t stand for this outcome, Claudio looked at Rosemarie with a sulky look in his eyes, leaving her at a loss for words.

(What should I do now...? Oh, I’ve got it.)

A brilliant idea popped into her mind.

“If you are not going to take no for an answer, then please call me by my name. Don’t call me ‘this one’ or ‘that one,’ but by my actual name.”

He would call her by name occasionally in the days leading up to the wedding, but not a single time after the proceedings were over. Just referring to her as “you” would be one thing, but using “this one” and “that one” and treating her like she was just some thing was, frankly, sad.

“Name?”

“Yes, I was quite happy when you said it earlier, so...” She smiled at Claudio, who looked as if she had caught him off-guard.

Earlier, when Claudio opened the carriage door, he had called her by name for the first time in ages. It not only came as a surprise, but it also made her feel warm on the inside.

“Your name, huh? I mean, what happened before, that was, yes... I was in the moment, you see, so...” Rosemarie felt the grip tighten in the hand Claudio had on hers, and he suddenly turned his face away.

She cocked her head in confusion as Claudio’s cheeks turned red and he put his hand over his mouth for some reason. It would appear to anyone with working eyes that he was embarrassed, but maybe it was a delayed feeling of shame, considering he hadn’t been calling her by name up until now.

Claudio glared at the floor as if he were in inner turmoil, but his eyes eventually came to stare straight at Rosemarie. His pair of blue eyes exuded a warmth as they stared at her, which caused her heart to skip a beat.

“—Rosemarie.”

Upon hearing his low voice call out her name cautiously, Rosemarie felt wrapped in a warm, fuzzy feeling. She had no idea that having someone say her name face-to-face in this manner would have been so embarrassing. A bashful smile adorned her face, to which Claudio tugged at her hand.

“Okay, I did it. Now, it’s your turn to say *my* name.”

“Huh? Me calling you by name would make you happy, Prince?”

“It’s not a matter of being happy or not; it’s more a matter of personally disliking being the only one forced into this torment.” He spat out the words like a sore loser. Even the dissatisfied expression on his face looked childlike, and made Rosemarie want to laugh.

“Very well, then. In that case...” She cleared her throat and gave saying his name a try, but it wouldn’t come out. She didn’t know what was going on, but her face started to heat up in a matter of no time.

“What’s wrong? Can’t say it?”

“No, I can! Please, just give me a moment. I swear, I can say it.” She glared at Claudio as he smirked at her, then took a breath. Thinking back, she realized she hadn’t called Claudio just by his name even once. She let her eyes fall, shut them tight, and opened her mouth.

“Prince C...laudio.”

“Yeah, try again.” Claudio wasted zero time in critiquing her performance with dissatisfaction. Rosemarie lifted her head, miffed.

“But, why? I said it just fine.”

“You sure didn’t. You paused before saying the whole thing.”

“...You’re being far too picky, Prince.” Rosemarie slumped her shoulders in the rattling carriage, but seeing as how Claudio was smiling in such enjoyment at her, she tried again, staring him right in the eyes and saying his name properly.

Chapter 5: Sweet Poison's Identity

"Prince Claudio, how are you feeling this morning?" Rosemarie asked her husband in a concerned tone as he entered the room to say good morning.

A few days had passed since she reconciled with Claudio. Due to him having more opportunities to come into contact with Rosemarie, his pale complexion had improved by a few degrees. Nonetheless, it was still worrying.

"Thanks, much better. No need to worry so much. You were in the middle of breakfast, right? Keep eating; don't mind me." Claudio curled his lips into a soft smile. Rosemarie had come to call Claudio by his name as a rule. For whatever reason, he seemed to enjoy that more than she did.

That smile was throwing her off since she had never seen it until just a few days ago, so she averted her eyes.

"My apologies. I'll be finishing up soon." She shoveled the rest of her mostly-eaten breakfast into her mouth.

"I know that you aren't able to partake in meals, so I am very sorry, as always." Upon finishing her meal, Heidi, who had been serving her breakfast this entire time, brought out her after-meal tea. Rosemarie's shoulders sank under her guilty conscience.

It wasn't until Claudio had started making his morning visits that she learned he was unable to take in any food other than liquids. This was most likely the effects of the Seed of Mana-Sealing. Apparently, with solid food, even if he took in the moisture, he wouldn't be able to digest the rest and would quickly throw it back up. According to him, the most he could handle was soup.

Now, knowing she'd even stolen the simple joy of eating from him, she couldn't bring herself to look him in the face.

"Don't apologize for that. I've come to grips with that already. It's nothing you should concern yourself with." When Claudio began showing his softer side to Rosemarie, his speech and manner both lost their biting edge, as though he'd been exorcised of a dark spirit. While she was relieved at that, she also found herself at a loss sometimes as to how she should behave in turn.

"That aside, give me your hand." Claudio held out his hand from the other side of the table. Rosemarie put her hand atop his without a moment's hesitation.

They had held hands constantly in the royal office to stabilize

Claudio's health in the days leading up to the Imperial Bout. Now, though, they split it up across the day—morning, noon, and night. Claudio purposely made the trek to Rosemarie's room. He was being too thoughtful, and it made her sort of antsy.

(If you think about it, it's like I'm Claudio's meal. Or, at the least, his medicine...)

Even though he just gave her hand a light squeeze, it made her heart almost jump out of her chest. Maybe it was a result of Claudio mellowing out, but for the past few days, small gestures like this were enough to almost send her over the edge.

"S-So, what is on the agenda for today?"

"Today, I'm going to be inspecting the irrigation work on the land under direct jurisdiction of the royal family. I'll probably make my return sometime late tonight. Hence why my only intake for today is going to be what I get this morning."

"Only morning and nothing else... In that case, would you like to rest your head on my lap?"

"I'll pass. You're starting to worry me with your zeal for heads on laps..." Claudio unenthusiastically covered his face with his other hand. Rosemarie opened her mouth, seeing her chance.

"Well, I thought that if it helps you sleep so well you drift off without noticing, then it must also help you recover a great deal physically... So, would you?"

"I just told you that I'm not, didn't I? That's far from proper morning conduct."

"In that case, all you gotta do is wait till nighttime, right?"

"You shut up and wait right there, Fritz."

The abrupt interruption in the conversation startled Rosemarie and made her turn to the door. There, she saw the clergyman with the mole poking his head through. Unlike Rosemarie, Claudio was not startled in the least and gave him a dirty look, signaling for him to butt out.

"Hate to interrupt a tender moment, Your Royal Wifeness, but mind if I borrow His Highness for a second?"

She nodded, albeit still in shock, as the ever-elusive clergyman flashed her a charming smile. She tried to take her hand away from Claudio, but he seized it and clasped it instead.

"Listen, I'm going to be running late today. Don't stay awake waiting for me like you did the day before yesterday. I'd be in a tough position if *your* health started to suffer."

"Okay, I won't."

His words were spoken firmly, but only to put emphasis on them. As Claudio looked at her with a tensed brow and a wry smile, Rosemarie squeezed his hand back in confirmation.

“You probably should’ve been more direct and told her, ‘Hey, I’m worried, so don’t wait up and go to sleep,’ don’cha think?” Once Claudio exited Rosemarie’s room, Fritz gave an exaggerated shrug and sighed.

“—Do you ever shut up? I hope you didn’t come here just to ask that. I’m short on time. Hurry and say what you’re here for. You’ve made progress on what I had you investigate, I take it?” Claudio pressed Fritz while beginning to walk and glancing at him. Fritz’s face instantly took a more serious turn.

“‘Progress’ is a way to put it, I suppose... But I assume you’re aware that Archbishop Kastner has been sticking his nose into Master Edel’s and your business and sniffing around, right?”

“Yeah, I was even assaulted in town the other day. It didn’t seem they were out to kill me, though.” He had left the assailant in town for the patrol knights to take care of, but had been informed that the prisoner slipped past their defenses and made a getaway. The patrol knights weren’t so incompetent as to let something like that happen. If he had to guess, his assumption was on a second person making the assailant’s escape possible.

“And you were apparently assaulted while walking by yourself after finishing work the day before yesterday, right?”

“Right. We caught him and tried to get him to spill who sent him, but he wouldn’t crack. I mean, not that we *don’t* know who sent him, of course.” That little fiasco ended up making Rosemarie stay up through the night waiting for him.

“Yeesh, and I’m betting Alto had the honor of trying. Boy, you know his methods can be rather nasty. Him not spilling the beans even after that is impressive.” Fritz gritted his teeth and twitched his cheek, to which Claudio gave a smirk in agreement.

“And so? What is your point here?”

“It would appear that the Archbishop wants to make certain of something.”

“Oh-ho, make certain of something, you say,” Claudio said in a display of forced-sounding adoration. If he was trying to make certain of something, it could have only been one thing. That one thing being: whether Crown Prince Claudio had mana or not.

“The minimum requirement to accede the throne is to be in possession of mana. I haven’t behaved in a way that would say otherwise up until now, but he might have acquired some intel. —In which case, I’m going to have to deal with him.”

“Now you’re speaking my language.” Fritz smiled in earnest enjoyment. He then scanned around them to confirm that no one was

around.

“Aah, right, and one more thing. I’m not quite sure what he’s trying to accomplish with this, but... The person that the Archbishop is trying to support for the bid to be crown prince doesn’t seem to have any mana of his own.”

Claudio raised an eyebrow, perplexed.

“What do you mean by that? How is he doing that in spite of blaming me for not having mana? What, is his plot to get a sorcerer on board and pretend that they have magical powers like I’m doing?” However, that was a herculean task made possible only by the presence of Edeltraud, the individual with enough prowess to serve as Archmagus. Even if he did have a sorcerer on his side who could rival Edeltraud, Archbishop Kastner’s extremely vocal distaste for mages made it hard to believe any would be willing to serve him. Plus...

“Still, considering the facts, even if they could accede to the rank of crown prince, they could never accede to the throne.”

“Yeah, and that’s what I’m not gettin’ here.”

Claudio diverted his attention away from Fritz as he shrugged his shoulders, stumped, and folded his arms in a contemplative pose.

Acceding to the throne without possessing mana—if such a feat were possible, then he would have gone through with it a long time ago.

“I can’t really imagine a guy who’s so prejudiced against mages would be knowledgeable about magic...” As he racked his brain, Fritz quickly took some distance, probably picking up on someone coming. It would have been a conflict of interests if Fritz was seen hanging around Claudio when he was supposed to be serving the Archbishop.

“At any rate, we may not be certain that they’re devoid of mana of their own, but he might try to stir something up soon. Just watch your back out there.”

Claudio made a final inquiry toward Fritz as he started to walk away.

“Fritz. Are you really okay with possibly losing your superior?”

“Superior? You’re supposed to be my superior around here, Your Highness, but might y’have any plans of going away?”

“Afraid I don’t.”

Fritz grinned, turned around, and walked off in the opposite direction of Claudio.

A sweet aroma filled the room. Rosemarie put the cup to her face as to fully appreciate the aroma of the soothing Kaola, but she let out a small sigh, nevertheless.

“Princess? Whatever is the matter?”

“Prince Claudio really is coming home late, isn’t he?” Heidi, who had already readied for bed, came into the lounge to check on Rosemarie. The princess replied in a dejected tone.

“I understand you must be lonely, but he will be coming home any moment now.”

“It’s not that I’m lonely... exactly...” She was simply worried whether his health had suffered due to going afar. Claudio was the type who hated showing people his vulnerabilities. Alto may have always been by his side, but not even he would have had a hard time noticing Claudio’s poor health.

(Am I lonely, though? I’m not too sure about that...)

Admittedly, she had looked forward to the mindless chit-chat they shared during their morning, noon, and night hand-holding sessions these past few days.

She sighed again. Then, it happened. There was a soft knock at the lounge door.

“See? Your much-awaited Highness has made his return.” Heidi hurried to open the door as Rosemarie put down her cup on the table, trying to keep herself from blushing. As soon as she stood up from the sofa, true to her expectations, a rather worn-out looking Claudio entered the room.

“Welcome back. You must be tired.”

“Were you about to go to bed? I saw that the lights were still on, so I dropped by...”

“Yes, I was, but it’s perfectly fine. It isn’t that late yet, after all.”

Claudio’s black hair was damp, most likely because he’d taken a bath upon returning and come right over. All he had on was a plain shirt and pair of trousers. Gone was the ornate jacket of this morning, with all its buttons and embroidered designs. This was her first time seeing Claudio wearing something more casual that wasn’t his sleepwear. It was filling her heart with the joyful idea that he was letting himself be more relaxed around her.

“Would you care for something to drink?”

“Sure. That’s quite the sweet aroma. You’ve been drinking that ‘Kaola’ or whatever that tea is called, right? You sure do love that stuff.” Claudio sat down on the sofa and looked at the cup sitting on the table. Rosemarie smiled, sitting beside him.

“Yes, because it’s delicious. —Would you care for a spot, Prince Claudio? I’ve heard it helps relieve fatigue. It is a little on the bitter side and does take some getting used to, though...”

“You mean it’s *not* sweet?” Claudio looked somewhat disappointed upon hearing that and Rosemarie cocked her head, perplexed. She’d never taken him for the kind to like sweet things, but maybe he had a sweet tooth despite appearances.

“You’re more a fan of sweet things? It’s delicious even with some sugar added.”

“I’ll give it a try, if that’s the case.” Claudio nodded to comply. Rosemarie was about to send Heidi to brew him up a cup, but Claudio took the cup that was already on the desk.

“This will do.”

“Huh? But I’ve been drinking out of that one, and it’s not all that swe... Ah!” She tried to stop him, but she was already too late as Claudio took a sip. His brows immediately furrowed as a result.

“What is this? People drink this... I mean, it has an interesting taste.” Claudio tried to smooth things over without badmouthing, despite having the biggest grimace on his face. He was acting funny, and Rosemarie found herself smiling because of it.

“I will bring you some water, okay?” She turned around with the intent of asking Heidi to go fetch a glass, but in the next instant, Claudio suddenly doubled over while holding his throat in pain. *Rattle rattle* went the cup as it wobbled, spilling Kaola onto the table.

“Prince Claudio?!” Clueless as to what just transpired, she stroked Claudio’s back as he writhed in distress.

“Heidi, send for a doctor!” Rosemarie barked, the all-too-sudden call causing the maid to stand straight up and at attention. She then rushed from the room in a panic.

Once Rosemarie managed to lay the wheezing Claudio down on the couch, she noticed the massive amount of sweat pouring from his forehead.

(What? What went wrong? He drank the Kaola, and then...)

Her mind confused, she held onto Claudio’s large hand. Although she presumably left to go call for a doctor, Heidi soon returned back to the room.

“Heidi, is the doctor here yet?”

“Squire Clausen has gone off to call for him, so he will return shortly. Everything is under control.”

She looked up at Heidi with tears in her eyes. The maid nodded and stroked Rosemarie’s back to reassure her.

Rosemarie glanced at the brown tea spilled over the table, huddling closer to Claudio on her knees as he breathed erratically. The sweet aroma encompassed the room, but at the moment, her patience with the smell was running thin.

(How could drinking the Kaola make his collapse...?)

No matter how much she loved it, she’d never have recommended it to him if she’d known this would happen. It was too late for regrets now, however. She fretted over what she could do now.

“...Make him vomit? Maybe I can relieve him by making him vomit up what he drank.”

“Don’t. Barely conscious, so making vomit would suffocate him.” A voice stopped Rosemarie, and she turned toward it. She had no idea when they had showed up, but there was Archmagus Edeltraud, the same hood still covering their face, practically sliding over to her.

“Claudio passed out, so I came. What happened?”

“It was all my fault. I let him drink Kaola tea...” On the verge of tears, she stared at Edeltraud beseechingly as they looked at Claudio with his pained expression.

“Where is this ‘Kaola’?” As Edeltraud pulled down the skin under Claudio’s eyes, looked at the pigmentation of his tongue, and checked his pulse, Rosemarie presented them with what was left of the Kaola.

“This is a tea that is often drunk in my country. But I have never once heard of a case of someone passing out after drinking Kaola.” After identifying the aroma of the Kaola still left in the cup, Edeltraud took off the black glove they always wore, dipping their fingertip into it and licking it. Their shoulders shuddered.

“This. What is this made out of? Leaves?”

“No, seeds. They produce it by removing the pulp of the fruit and roasting the seeds out of that. You then take the granulated result of those roasted seeds, dissolve it in water, and drink. It’s an item that must be prepared by a trained artisan to be drinkable...”

“Seeds? What kind? Show me.”

Trying to answer each question that Edeltraud shot at her the best she could, Rosemarie had Heidi bring the Kaola seeds over to them.

Looking at the brown, elliptical seeds no bigger than the tip of a pinky contained in the porcelain container, Edeltraud carefully pinched one between their fingers.

“These are Kaola? Positive?” Edeltraud said, their voice cracking. Rosemarie didn’t know what expression they were making, but she did know that they were clearly shaken up. A terrible feeling of apprehension grew in her chest.

“Yes, this is Kaola. I’ve been told they only grow it in Volland soil.”

“No way. Can’t be. These here are... These are Seeds of Mana-Sealing!” Edeltraud almost shouted, sending Rosemarie’s heart racing.

Leaving Rosemarie to freeze up on her own, Edeltraud turned to Claudio as he writhed in a cold sweat and placed their hand atop his abdomen.

“Extra Seed of Mana-Sealing that he took into his body is probably repelling with the one already in his body, causing adverse reaction. It still hasn’t been absorbed yet. It can be taken out. Princess, hold on to Claudio’s hand tight.”

As Rosemarie’s hand shivered, finally comprehending the severity of the situation, she used it to hold on to Claudio’s tightly.

Edeltraud's hand on Claudio's abdomen started to glow a faint shade of green. The green light slowly ascended to his chest, passed his throat, and eventually reached his mouth. Claudio began to thrash around as if to resist it, but Rosemarie desperately embraced his hand.

"...!!"

A green light shot out of Claudio's mouth. The stuff that he threw up turned into a fine brown powder and scattered all over before dispersing in the blink of an eye.

"Prince Claudio!" Rosemarie stroked his shoulders as he hacked violently. His tightly-shut eyes opened weakly, and his blue eyes looked vacantly over at Rosemarie.

"Don't cry." His voice was raspy, but it was audible. Claudio's hand stroked Rosemarie's head in a slightly unrefined manner as she broke down in tears of relief and guilt. However, his hand soon stopped, and he proceeded to snore gently.

"He's fine now. Close call, though. Will admit." Edeltraud breathed a sigh of relief before stretching themselves up to their feet with a nod of their head. On the other hand, Rosemarie was so relieved that she collapsed on her rear right where she was.

"What have I done..."

"You just didn't know. I didn't know that the Seeds of Mana-Sealing were commonly drunk under that name, either. Means that the world is brimming with mysteries." After putting their glove back on, Edeltraud stroked Rosemarie's head, running their surprisingly slender fingers through her hair. She had been convinced that no good would come if Edeltraud was involved in anything. But right now, she shuddered to think about what might have happened if the sorcerer had not been there.

"It's okay. Claudio wouldn't blame you nowadays. It was his own fault for drinking."

"—Thank you... very much, Mage Edeltraud." They were right. Claudio wouldn't have gotten unreasonably angry at her with the way he was nowadays. Even so, she couldn't help but feel guilty.

"Princess, please keep your chin up. Let us allow His Highness to rest in bed for the time being."

"Heidi... Yes, you're right. My bedroom will do, so would you mind getting things ready?"

Heidi nodded with a meek expression and exited the lounge. Upon seeing that she had, Rosemarie turned back toward Edeltraud, who was staring at the Kaola seeds with great interest.

"Master Edel, is there anything else that I can do?" Right now, she felt like she could do anything. In comparison to Claudio having his life in jeopardy due to the Seeds of Mana-Sealing, being able to see people's animosity was a drop in the bucket. Edeltraud paused for a

split second, but then quickly turned around to face Rosemarie.

“—There is. Keep in your arms the whole night. Should get a lot better if you do.”

“Huh? You want me? To do that?” She was to hold Claudio in her arms the entire night through.

Claudio had always been the one pulling her close or clasping his hands over hers, but she had never initiated contact herself.

Just as she was about to chicken out and shake her head, Edeltraud came right over to her. While their eyes may have been behind their hood, she felt their strong gaze upon her.

“Yes. You.”

She hoped that indifferent yet threatening ring to their sentence was all in her imagination.

While Rosemarie was gripped with hesitation, a commotion stirred from the corridor.

“Milady! I have brought you the doctor!” Without so much as knocking, Alto barged through the door and came rushing in with the middle-aged doctor slung over his shoulder like a piece of luggage. A maid carrying the doctor’s things followed soon after, running into the room with panic on her face.

It had almost completely slipped her mind, but that was right. Alto was supposed to be out getting the doctor.

“Squire Clausen, you see...”

“No need for doctor. Claudio was just tired and resting now. Volland princess jumped to conclusions.” Edeltraud jumped in the middle of her hasty efforts to give Alto an excuse.

Alto saw that the sorcerer was there and, still breathing heavily, sank to one knee in exhaustion. Rosemarie saw him fall and slumped her shoulders, feeling extremely apologetic.

The crooks of his arms were warm.

Claudio realized he was coming back to his senses as he squeezed that warmth, akin to the genial rays of the sun, so as to make sure it didn’t get away.

He had some problems breathing before—so much so it made him think he was getting his throat crushed—but there wasn’t a trace of those problems left now. Nor was he sweating all over, despite being freezing cold like before.

(What happened to me...?)

His memory after he drank the Kaola tea was hazy, but he assumed that there was some specific reason for his health deteriorating.

He slowly opened his eyes partway. The room was filled with the

faint light of early morning. Thanks to his sleepless days and night, the silence of morning was something he wasn't terribly fond of. Despite the Seed of Mana-Sealing within him craving mana, he felt as if it grew by bathing in the sun due to its plant origins.

As if bothered by the weak light, he pressed his face against whatever it was he was hugging. The somewhat cold and hard sensation Claudio felt as a result made him open his eyes suspiciously.

"...Uh, *what?*" What appeared before his eyes was a bucket with a beautiful silver gleam. There was not a spot of rust or grime to be found due to it being so well-maintained, no doubt, but the fact remained—it was a bucket. The bright-green ribbon tied to a portion of the handle gave it a rather innocent charm.

(God, what is the world coming to if a bucket has an "innocent charm"?)

Having just woken up, his thoughts weren't all in order. As he tried to get his gears cranking, the bucket moved slightly. Upon closer inspection, it seemed as though he had been sleeping with someone wearing a bucket on their head in his embrace.

"—Good, um... morning." He could hear a timid, reserved voice come from under the bucket. He gazed, dumbfounded, at the source of the familiar voice before putting his hand on the bucket. After getting past a tiny bit of resistance, he took off the bucket. What appeared underneath it was a beet-red face topped with a head of mahogany hair and a pair of green eyes—features that, for all intents and purposes, made up his wife.

"...Why am I sleeping with you? Also, what is this bucket all about?"

"I-I'm using it for my mental stability!" Rosemarie nervously explained what happened last night. He was informed on the whole thing. He had collapsed from drinking the Kaola tea. The Kaola seed was the same as the Seed of Mana-Sealing. By drinking it, the Seed that was already in his body had sparked an adverse reaction, which caused him to pass out. After a deep sigh, he held his forehead.

"I see... To think that drink was made up of Seeds of Mana-Sealing..."

"Are you mad at me? I pretty much recommended poison to you." Rosemarie looked ready to cry. When he stared at her, she twitched her shoulder as though frightened.

"What is the point in getting mad? You didn't know that this Kaola, or whatever it's called, was the same as the Seed of Mana-Sealing, right? Getting mad over that would be pointless. That aside, why am I here sleeping with you?"

"Master Edel told me that if I slept with you in my arms the whole night, your condition would improve, so... Not very enjoyable for you,

I'm sure."

"—I never said that."

With her face beet red, Rosemarie tried to distance herself, but she was tucked even closer into his arms.

It was Rosemarie who most likely found it the least enjoyable out of the two. After all, no matter how much she forgave him, she still had to keep the man who treated her so poorly in her arms the whole time.

"I never said that. I enjoyed your warmth." He hugged her closer, making sure not to crush her, and her sleek hair grazed his cheek. The aroma of the Kaola that put him through hell last night drifted throughout the room, which caused him to knit his brows for a split second before permitting it once he considered that it belonged to her.



“P-Prince Claudio, are you sleep talking? I hope you know I’m not a talking pillow...”

“A pillow can’t very well talk.”

“In that case, let’s split off, okay? Oh, you can use my lap as a pillow, though. Let’s do that instead.”

“If I use your lap as a pillow, you won’t be able lie down. It’s still rather early in the morning. If you’re worried about my body, then just keep yourself still.” He softly squeezed at Rosemarie, making her squirm a bit. But she put her face against Claudio’s chest, relaxed, and eased her body into his soon enough.

“—Prince Claudio, I will go to your office for your midday replenishment.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“If you had to ask me whether I am or am not sure, I am certainly not sure, but I am sure enough. At least, I think I am sure enough that I can assure that.”

“...Can you even hear the words coming out of your own mouth?” He couldn’t see her face, but she was probably serious. He knew he shouldn’t laugh, but she was acting downright comical.

“I-In any case! I can get over the fact that I see the heads of people who hold animosity as beasts if it will help you get any better, Prince Claudio,” she declared assuredly as her shoulders tensed up. Just thinking of it made her go on the defensive, so the fact that Rosemarie was willing to get over her fear for his sake filled him with a vague, pleasant sense of embarrassment.

“Just so I’m sure, your eyes even make the heads of people you yourself trust turn into beast heads?”

“Huh? Oh, yes. That’s right. Even when Heidi gets angry, she gets a black cat head.” Rosemarie slowly lifted her head, befuddled.

“I see... That must be rough on you.”

Rosemarie gasped in Claudio’s arms.

“—I can’t quite comprehend just how terrifying it must be to be able to see animosity and negative emotions. However, if you see the heads of people you trust as beasts just because they harbor the slightest bit of dissatisfaction, it’s no small wonder why you’d be hurt by that.” He had been so blinded with resentment up until a few days ago that he never even realized this. It wasn’t the type of animosity one encountered when dealing with bureaucrat or aristocrats; it was a matter of having someone you trust enough to allow into your heart, or even a member of your own family, looking like that if they had any negative emotions at all. You were being unintentionally betrayed by someone you trust. That was most likely absolutely mortifying.

“So, really, you don’t need to overexert yourself.”

A teary film started to form over Rosemarie’s green eyes all at

once. She pursed her lips as she attempted to keep the tears from spilling from her eyes, but she shook her head regardless.

“No. Please, don’t spoil me so much. It makes me feel uneasy.”

“My intentions aren’t to spoil you, though. I’m just telling you not to overexert yourself. I’m not telling you not make an appearance. — Aah, don’t cry. Your face will get all puffy and homely.”

“Yes... I’m aware of that!” He finally tried to wipe away the tears streaming down her face, but she suddenly turned her face on him. Her versatile expressions were amusing him and made him want to say all sorts of things, which was an issue.

Claudio pulled the angry Rosemarie closer and smiled wryly at that small hang-up in his head while patting his wife comfortingly on the back.

Chapter 6: Tale of the Sacred Beast in the Forbidden Forest

“Prince Claudio, could you please repeat what you just said?” Rosemarie stared at Claudio with a dead serious expression.

It was the night after Claudio had collapsed due to the Kaola tea. Feeling obligated not to rest too much, Claudio headed to perform his official duties, then dropped by Rosemarie’s room when he was done for the day. When he got there, he broke the news to her as if it were nothing at all.

“You’re forbidden from drinking Kaola. Don’t drink any until Master Edel is done with their analysis.”

“Kaola... forbidden...” She had exposed Claudio to mortal danger. There were no two ways about it. However, although she had felt herself succumbing to feelings of self-reproach, wouldn’t it suffice if she just didn’t drink it in front of him?

“I’ve already taken the liberty of ordering the maid to collect Baltzar’s entire supply. I’ve given her explicit instructions to hand over any to Master Edel by way of Alto right away, even if you send out for it from Volland.” Claudio informed her with a smile on his face, almost as if saying he has already predicted any bright idea Rosemarie might have. Rosemarie hung her head in disappointment.

(There goes Tranquilizer #2...)

Her steadfast #1 was her bucket.

Rosemarie slumped her shoulders with the wind knocked sorely out of her sails while Claudio added more insult to injury.

“Ah, yes. And in ten days’ time, the crown prince of the neighboring nation, Rivera, will be making a visit with the crown princess, so it will be your duty to entertain said crown princess. Rivera as a nation has been close allies with Baltzar forever. I’d like you to be on your best behavior. Which means absolutely no bucket wearing during their stay.”

Rosemarie was left in shock upon learning that her #1 Tranquilizer had been sealed off from her. Rosemarie’s spirits may have dropped, but Claudio had a wry smile on his face for whatever reason.

“You don’t need to look *that* grim. Sure, I’ve banned your Kaola and your bucket, but I’m going to give you something nice in return.”

“Something nice?” Was there even anything better than those two things?

She cocked her head, positively perplexed. The somewhat amused-

looking Claudio led her out of the room.

It was late at night. They went through the hallway, which was vacant aside from the knights on patrol they would occasionally pass by on the way, and they were approaching the rose garden that was visible from Rosemarie's quarters. The same rose garden that she wanted to visit had already passed its peak bloom, but seeing the vibrant green leaves was a refreshing sight for her heart.

"Um, where might we be going?" Rosemarie asked Claudio from behind as he walked with her in tow, passing the rose garden as well. All he did was smile suggestively without giving her a proper response.

Soon, they arrived at garden considerably off to the side among the many gardens of the royal palace. A slight glance revealed that the dense Forbidden Forest, which resided at the back of the castle, was right nearby. What Rosemarie then saw there made her eyes widen in surprise.

"...A greenhouse?"

A greenhouse stood beside a giant yew tree as if it were long since forgotten. The moonlight's reflection kept her from making out what was on the inside, but the glass building was most definitely a greenhouse.

Claudio led her inside by the hand. Perhaps thanks to some sort of spell, a faint light suddenly illuminated the room. What that light shone upon was a variety of multicolored roses. However, perhaps due to a lack of maintenance, the branches were growing as they pleased, looking a bit unruly.

"This place..."

"It's a greenhouse that the royal gardener used to use in the past. Something about seeing some sort of shadow stalking around the Forbidden Forest scared them so bad that they abandoned it. Due to the spread of those rumors, not many people come near it. So, I'm giving the place to you."

"You're giving it to me? Really?" Her eyes lit up and she scanned the room. There had been a greenhouse at her villa in Volland as well, but it was far smaller than this.

She looked up at Claudio with a big smile on her face, which prompted him to smile in return.

"Yes, really. I heard from your maid. You're a fan of gardening, right? In exchange for banning your Kaola and your bucket, feel free to use this place. However, you also have to worry about Master Edel using this place for an afternoon nap on occasion, or even me dropping by while on a walk. This is all assuming you're not afraid of the Forbidden Forest."

"As long as I don't go into the forest, there should be no problem,

correct? In that case, I have nothing to fear. I'm also already used to both you and Master Edel, so I will be fine. Thank you so much for this!"

Since she wasn't raised in Baltzar, the concept of the Forbidden Forest being a place to fear wasn't really instilled into her. It had been out of the question for a good while, but now that things had settled down, she wanted to utilize her green thumb and garden—even a potted plant would have sufficed.

When she turned around to face Claudio and extend her thanks, the glass of the greenhouse acted as a makeshift mirror, and the reflection of his Silver Lion head entered her view. It had been quite a while since she last saw him look like that, so it startled her for a split second.

"Are you afraid?" Claudio quickly detected what was going on and asked her that question in an impassive tone.

"No, just a little startled. It's just that my eyes always show your head as being human, so whenever I see you as the sacred beast, I brace myself because I'm able to see the results of stealing your mana with my own eyes." They had to get Claudio's mana back to him so that he could have the same human face that she saw through her eyes, and quickly. Otherwise, Claudio would be driven out of his position of crown prince.

That moment of deep thought made her come to a realization.

"Um, that reminds me. I've been putting off asking this for a while, but why is having mana a prerequisite to accede to the throne?"

"Oh, that? I suppose it's natural you wouldn't know. I never told you, after all. It would be inconvenient in many regards if this information were to spread too far. In fact, only a certain handful of people know about..." Claudio unnaturally cut off his own sentence. Rosemarie looked at his face with suspicion to see that his expression had turned contemplative and grim.

"—It couldn't be... Might there be a definite chance that Kastner doesn't know...?"

"What about the Archbishop?" Claudio mentioned before that Archbishop Kastner was always challenging him. She started to worry that there might be some sort of issue afoot. She found herself tugging at Claudio's cuff, and he looked back down at her, slightly startled.

"O-Okay, okay. I'll fill you in, so wipe all that worry off your face." Claudio lightly cleared his throat and smiled wryly.

"Baltzar's royal palace was constructed in order to contain the spread of the Forbidden Forest. The king's mana is pivotal. If the king has no mana, then the forest would continue to spread, and the capital would be overrun with trees and eventually fall to ruin."

“Fall to ruin...” she repeated, her face suddenly turning pale. That was something that wasn’t going to end simply by removing Claudio as crown prince.

“Does this mean that I just so happened to do something that might destroy the nation?”

“In conclusion, you did. Even so, I didn’t give that point the consideration it needed, either. In spite of me being in a position of responsibility, I conducted myself carelessly in search of you instead of leaving it to those around me.” Claudio admitting that he shared in the blame prompted Rosemarie to let go of his sleeve. That still made her the number one cause of all this, nevertheless.

“At this point in time, His Majesty has stated that he will not remove me as crown prince, but he probably has much to consider. Then again, I’m left to struggle until it’s proven that my mana can’t be retrieved no matter what.” Claudio smiled audaciously and Rosemarie dropped her gaze.

“How... How are you able to stay so strong, Prince Claudio?”

“Because lives hang in the balance. It’s only right. If I were to be removed as crown prince, I would meet a miserable end. And all of those who followed me might go down with me. It can turn a man desperate.”

The chill running down her spine made Rosemarie rub her arm. Volland was a nation free of political struggles. It was only now that she had the realization that she had come to a terrifying place.

“Aah, come on, let’s end this talk of doom and gloom. Since we took the time to get here, why don’t you look around the greenhouse?” Claudio spoke in an almost forced cheery tone as he gave her a push on the back. Rosemarie finally lifted her head because of it.

Just as she was urged, she scanned the greenhouse in disarray and started walking. Once she did, her mind was entranced by the bits of scenery that passed her by one after another.

“Oh, dear. These stems have to be taken out. I wonder if they will liven up once I give them some nutrients.”

“—”

“These potted plants need to be put into different pots... Ah! There are bugs!”

“—marie!”

She walked around the greenhouse positively giddy and separated from Claudio. That was when she suddenly had her shoulder grabbed.

“Rosemarie!”

“Yes? Is something the matter?”

“I’ve been calling you a million times.” Claudio looked sulky, most likely upset that she hadn’t answered his calls. She blinked vacantly

before sagging her eyebrows.

"I apologize. I was distracted. I haven't forgotten about you, Prince Claudio, so please do not sulk."

"I am *not* sulking. I'm just peeved." Claudio lightly pinched at her cheeks with his finger. It felt as though Claudio was behaving rather childishly toward her. Once she softly pulled off the hand pinching her cheeks, Claudio twisted his mouth in dissatisfaction.

"You seem likely to get carried away and spend all your time here. Was giving this place to you a mistake?"

"If it was a mistake, then are you going to take it away? Please don't say that now after all you've already promised. With my Kaola and bucket banned, if I can't even garden, then I doubt I can go on living." The despondency of possibly being denied what she thought she would be receiving made tears form in her eyes as she looked up at Claudio. He instantly found himself at a loss for words.

"...You know, in your case, you're likely to *actually* waste away." Claudio let out a disappointed sigh and quickly made his way toward the greenhouse exit. Rosemarie attempted to follow him out, but as soon as she stepped out, her hair got caught on the overgrown branches of the yew tree.

"...Ow!"

"Aah, hold on. Just stay still." Claudio helped untangle her hair from the branch. His face approached hers. Claudio was so close that she could see his long eyelashes casting a shadow over his eyes, which made her pulse race. She averted her gaze bashfully.

"W-Would it be okay if I trimmed the branches of this yew tree a tad?" She opened her mouth and spoke to divert attention away from her noisy heartbeat. Claudio looked slightly indecisive, but nodded his head in reply.

"This thing's job is to ward away evil. Since it's close to the Forbidden Forest, it would be preferable not to clip at it..." Claudio combed his fingers through Rosemarie's hair now that it was free from the branch, then grinned as if an idea had sprung to mind.

"As I was saying earlier, let's settle on the time. You are allowed here for up to two hours a day. If you want to be here any longer, you will have to wait until I've finished my duties."

"Seeing as how I am not a child, deciding the time for me seems..."

"If you are not a child, then you can make the switch, right?"

That statement clammed her right up, making Claudio smile in amusement. She looked back at him with a bitter stare.

"Yes, but I feel awkward having you keep me company after finishing up your work, Prince Claudio."

"Don't concern yourself with that. Late-night jaunts have always

been a pastime of mine,” Claudio said. He smiled cynically as if it were nothing, but she remembered Heidi saying something similar some time back. She also remembered that it wasn’t supposed to have good connotations. After a little thought, it sprung back into her mind.

“Late-night jaunt’ means cheating, if I remember correctly...”

“And who was it that taught you *that* meaning? I mean walking at night. Evening strolls? I do it because I can’t sleep anyway.” He pinched her cheeks ill-temperedly once more, and then let go right before she told him that it was starting to smart. She wondered why Claudio was pinching her so much today. And she wanted to put on her bucket before her run-of-the-mill face swelled up and got even more homely. As she rubbed her cheeks, she could feel Claudio’s eyes upon her.

“If you’re so concerned about me cheating, I have to wonder how it is you think of me.”

“Huh...?” He stared right at her, and Rosemarie could feel her face crawling to a boil.

It wasn’t like he was accusing her. At the same time, while she felt like she shouldn’t answer that question, she didn’t know if she could give him a concise answer, regardless. She quivered her lips in indecision.

However, she was certain that seeing another girl by Claudio’s side would, more or less, put her in an unpleasant mood.

“A-Anyway, we’ll just put that off to the side,” Claudio said to break the ice, awkwardly clearing his throat and beginning to walk yet again.

“Point is, you don’t have to worry about me like that. With you with me, I don’t tire as much, you see. The only thing I ask of you is that since I take short trips away from the palace, you need to have an Imperial Guard to bodyguard you while I’m not around.”

“Okay, I understand,” she said, nodding firmly and repeatedly. Her head was filled with ideas on what to get started on tomorrow. She was so elated she wanted to start humming a little tune.

“Thank you so much for this, Prince Claudio,” she thanked Claudio aloud with a small tug at his jacket as he walked in front of her. Claudio’s shoulders bounced, and he looked past them to Rosemarie. It almost looked like he was trying to contain a chuckle, which was a relief.

“You thanked me just a second ago.”

“Yes, but I feel like saying it over and over. This present has made me the happiest so far.” Out of all the gifts that Claudio has given her, this was truly the best. After all, it was one that he prepared with proper consideration for her.

She chuckled bashfully, and Claudio’s face turned red instantly.

For whatever reason, Claudio was going red from his chin to his ears. But when she reached out to him out of concern that he might be coming down with a fever, he took a few steps back. He then turned himself away.

"This present making you the happiest so far means that the other ones I sent you didn't make you happy, I'm guessing."

"Huh? Oh, I'm sorry..."

"—! Aah, wait, it's not like that. I'm not mad at you, uh, of course...! I guess I'm just getting myself down, that's all."

"Is that so? Um, well, I'm very sorry for mistaking that for anger!" Claudio tried to smooth things over in a rare display of panic. Perhaps that impatience transferred over, because Rosemarie, now also thrown into a panic, bowed her head and locked eyes with Claudio. The two of them then both ended up smiling at the same time.

The tepid air of summer grazed her skin.

The high midday temperature didn't drop much in the transition to night and was still hot enough to draw a sweat. Perhaps it was the heat from the massive amount of people adding to the overall sultriness in the grand hall.

Rosemarie looked at the brightly illuminated hall from her spot next to the royals' private entrance. She was here to attend the evening gala. Her hands were placed on her chest and shaking in tension and fear.

"Heidi, don't you think the neckline of this is a little *too* open...? It's lower than my collarbone. This is so embarrassing that I just want to go back to my room... Oh, but the waiting room will do, too. Let's try that," Rosemarie complained impatiently to Heidi beside her. She hadn't worn a dress with a neckline this open since the wedding. Since she didn't approve of showing too much skin during a midday event when she was attending to the masses at the Imperial Bout, her usual closed-neck dress had sufficed.

But now she was clad in a pink dress, made from the special fabric of the neighboring nation, Rivera. The smooth texture of the thin cloth was filling her with a sense of anxiety.

"No can do. You promised His Highness that you would be on your best behavior, did you not? Plus, that dress is what is in style nowadays. There is nothing odd about it."

"But I'm fearful that it might be impolite toward the Crown Prince and Princess of Rivera..."

The crown prince and princess of Rivera that Claudio mentioned had arrived this afternoon. Rosemarie had accompanied Claudio to greet them. The crown prince of Rivera was probably already

acquainted with Claudio and showed no surprise over his Silver Lion head; the crown princess, on the other hand, went deathly pale as if she had seen a monster. That pale face instantly transformed into a cowl, filling Rosemarie with a bitter sense of anxiety.

(I mean, honestly, Prince Claudio isn't even anything to fear.)

He may have had a lion head, but he himself was a charming and affable person. She certainly wasn't one to talk, but she took offense to being judged based on appearances alone.

"Lady Rosemarie," a dignified female voice called her suddenly from behind. She turned around, slightly wary, to find a girl standing behind her, clad in a light blue dress made from the same material as Rosemarie's own pink dress. This girl, with all the poise of a prim and beautiful lady, was the Crown Princess of Rivera.

"Your dress is made from Rivera material, I see. It pleases me ever so to see you wearing it. Quite the immaculate fit on you."

"O-Oh, thank you very much."

The Crown Princess of Rivera had an amicable attitude and her head, this time around, was human. She didn't seem to have any feelings of animosity toward Rosemarie, which was a real relief. She thought she saw the Crown Princess of Rivera looking around the area before smiling at her.

"It would seem Their Highnesses are not done speaking yet."

"Yes, it would. Are you tired at all?" Her body was tense from anxiety, but she managed to eke out a reply without her voice trembling. Claudio and the Crown Prince of Rivera hadn't arrived yet, which meant their diplomatic talks were likely running long.

"Oh, no. Not very much so. Since this is my first time in a foreign country, everything I see and hear is so new and exciting that I've forgotten about any fatigue I may have had. For example, I've heard that you, Lady Rosemarie, were wed having hailed from Volland."

"Are you familiar with my mother country?"

"Indeed, I have heard that it is a religiously devout country with beautiful scenery. You must have been more shocked than I when you came to Baltzar," the Crown Princess said, brimming with interest, her head not turning into a beast head the entire time they conversed. In which case, that meant she was being genuine with Rosemarie.

Albeit with some slight awkwardness, the two then proceeded to chit-chat for a stint. Soon, the tension freed itself from Rosemarie's shoulders and they relaxed. However, that was when she was asked the question:

"Um, please do not take this the wrong way, but, Lady Rosemarie... does Crown Prince Claudio not frighten you at all?" The crown princess's face had been all smiles before she said that, but it started to warp. In a similar vein to when Rosemarie had gone to greet

her, her head turned bovine, covered in a velvety pelt of short brown hair. Her gentle sclera-less eyes stared at Rosemarie and her long tongue formed words.

“Honestly speaking, he is quite disturbing to me. I know they say that he is the avatar of a sacred beast, but that person as a husband would be...”

“He does not frighten me.” Rosemarie smiled. Perplexingly enough, even faced with someone now sporting a beast head, she didn’t have an ounce of fear.

For better or worse, the crown princess here was most likely being forthright. Although, one could have argued that it was a tad inconsiderate that she deemed it appropriate to voice something like this to Rosemarie, seeing as how she was Claudio’s wife.

“Prince Claudio is an extremely good person. He is a strong, kind, and wonderful individual whom someone as abject and mediocre as myself doesn’t deserve. Even if the people around him are frightened of him, so long as Claudio needs me, I would like to be right there by his side.” Claudio has had a human head this entire time and he had done things that hurt her feelings. Even if she were to see his head as the Silver Lion now, it would be too late; she wouldn’t be frightened of him.

“Also—”

“You can stop right there, Rosemarie.” Claudio’s voice abruptly cut into the conversation, and she looked to the direction it came from. There stood Claudio, holding his forehead with one hand, with the pleasant-looking Crown Prince of Rivera by his side. Rosemarie snapped to her senses upon seeing the part of Claudio’s face not concealed by his hand with brows knit in distress. She ruminated on the words she’d just said and froze up. The Crown Prince of Rivera started to chuckle.

“Your harmonious display of friendship is enough to make me blush. It would seem that my wife has made some rude remarks. I beg that you forgive her.” The simple yet honest Crown Prince of Rivera bowed his head as he spoke, and the Crown Princess followed suit apologetically. The two of them then took the liberty of entering the hall first.

“How long were you listening?” Once the two of them disappeared into the hall, Rosemarie finally came out of her loss for words and addressed Claudio, who looked to be in a somewhat awkward mood.

“Since ‘He does not frighten me.’”

“...I want to wear my bucket and hole up in my room.” Which meant that he listened to *pretty much* everything. Overwhelmed by embarrassment, she covered her face with her hands.

“I’ve put you in a bad mood, haven’t I? I’m sorry, please forgive

me. I've been speaking so presumptuously. But... all of what I said is true." She didn't want him to think that she was just saying things off-the-cuff to suit the Crown Princess of Rivera.

Claudio wasn't giving her a verbal response, so she slowly removed her hands and looked up at him. He put his hand on the back of his neck and averted her gaze. Both his face and ears were turning light red.

"Are you angry? Um..." Wanting to confirm whether or not Claudio was angry, she tried stepping into his line of sight, but he backed away as though surprised. Even though it was only slightly, she was disappointed.

"—I'm, um, sorry for ruining your mood and..."

"No, you've got it wrong. I'm not angry." Although he said that he wasn't angry, his blunt tone made Rosemarie scratch her figurative head. Claudio let out a huge sigh and then finally turned to her.

"It's just because you're dressed the way you are."

"Huh...? Oh, I'm sorry. I had a feeling this would be improper." It seemed that they weren't making much headway in conversation, but once she slumped her shoulders, Claudio cleared his throat irritably.

"I swear, I hate myself sometimes. —Okay, I'm being unclear. I'm not trying to berate you. It looks so good on you, I don't like the idea of you going in there and showing yourself off to all those people." Claudio said, sulky, as Rosemarie blushed her face off.

She ended up wanting to read deeper into the subject, and it had thrown her mind into confusion. She glanced up at Claudio, and he turned away a bit bashfully.

"—Um, hello, pardon me, but I would appreciate it if you two would remember I'm still here. Also, I would appreciate it if you two would make your way into the hall now," Heidi interrupted, her tone reserved. Rosemarie gasped, her shoulders jolting in realization. Her cheeks flushed; she felt as though a relative just saw her getting confessed to.

"Let's head in." After clearing his throat to collect himself, Claudio offered his hand. Grabbing hold of it nervously, Rosemarie took a deep breath and faced front. Suddenly, Claudio leaned over ever so slightly.

"About what you said to the Crown Princess of Rivera a moment ago... Hearing you say that you think about me in that way... it made me, um, well... happy. Happy, yes."

Rosemarie's eyes lit up at the word "happy," the joy welling up from inside her and erupting onto her face as a big smile.

Once she stood at the entrance to the hall at Claudio's side, the eyes of the people in attendance all drew toward her at once.

Several packs of beast eyes fixed on her, and several groups of

human eyes also did the same. Her legs were quivering.

(It's okay, it's okay, Claudio is right here. There is nothing to fear. He won't abandon me or anything like that anymore.)

As she said that to herself over and over again to convince herself, the hand she'd entrusted to Claudio was tugged suddenly, yet gently.

When she turned her attention over to him, her gaze met his powerful and reassuring pair of blue eyes.

The two of them both smiled with a slight nod at one another and slowly carried themselves forward.

As Rosemarie moved from the clamorous hall to the balcony, the chilly air filled her with a sense of relief.

"Are you okay? We're almost through here, so hang in there." Claudio stood behind Rosemarie as if supporting her back. She looked up at him and flashed a pitiful smile.

"Just a little tired. But what about you, Prince Claudio? How are you holding up?"

"Yes, I'm doing just fine." Claudio said that, and his complexion hadn't been too bad when Rosemarie had checked on it in the bright hall, so he probably really was fine.

"We've made our rounds for hellos, and the Crown Prince and Princess of Rivera are likely ready to take their leave. Once they do, I see no issue with us also taking our leave. —On an unrelated note, you're not the best dancer, are you? I never would have guessed that you would be tripping over your own feet." As a cue for the start of the evening festivities, Rosemarie ended up dancing with Claudio, but he kept flubbing it up by stepping on the fringe of her dress and almost taking a spill several times.

"I would always hole myself up in the villa, so I would never attend evening galas. That also means that I hardly ever had any practice. I believe it would actually be peculiar if I danced well." She shot Claudio a bitter look as he chuckled. He brushed aside the hair falling over her cheek with his fingers and presented the same hand to her.

"Shall we practice now, then? Not only can you hear the music from here, but people would have to go out of their way to watch us."

"Huh? No, I think I'll pass," she said, turning down the offer immediately and backing up. Claudio laughed, his shoulders bouncing.

"Come on. I'm asking you nicely, aren't I?"

"Just because you have to go out of your way to watch doesn't mean that no one will be around..." She had just finished tripping over herself in grand fashion before a whole hall of people. If someone

were to witness them practicing out here, it would have fueled the rumor mill immensely.

"If they were to find out that the crown princess cannot even dance, they might talk ill of you for marrying such an uncultured wife, Prince Claudio."

"It's too late for something so trivial to lower my reputation, but if you don't wish to do so, then we won't." Rosemarie's eyes dropped as Claudio smiled softly.

Claudio already made himself easy to be an object of fear to people. An inexperienced wife such as herself would make it all too easy for his reputation to plummet. Even if it were a slight matter, he still needed to be mindful of it.

(If only he didn't have a lion head...)

In order for that to happen, however, she needed to return his mana to him. After lifting her head, Rosemarie noticed that Claudio was looking over at the garden with a grim look on his face.

"Is there something wrong...?"

"Get down!" With that tense declaration, he yanked on her arm and thrust her toward the entrance of the hall. At almost the same time, three silhouetted figures descended from above. Each figure held a silver knife that glinted in the light of the room.

"—?!" Rosemarie stifled her scream and backed away. While she did, Claudio retaliated by kicking one of the assailant's knives to the ground. Rosemarie turned herself toward the hall in order to call for help from inside.

"Eeeek!!"

"Who are you people?!"

Screams of panic and anger that didn't belong to her came from the hall. Guests came running their way, attempting to escape the assailants who had infiltrated from the other balcony. They saw Claudio in the midst of battle and started to run away in a panic.

The evening gala was being raided by a group of people—that was the only thing that she knew. As for who they were targeting, that was a different story.

"Rosemarie!" Claudio called, grabbing for her in the confusion.

"Did they hurt you?! The assailants, are they..."

"I defeated them. The castle patrol knights have come as reinforcements."

Things began to shift back to reality. The assailants who had raided the hall weren't very great in number, and were currently being apprehended one by one by the castle's knights.

King Baltzar and the Crown Prince and Princess of Rivera had likely been evacuated immediately because Rosemarie couldn't spot them anywhere.

“Um, did they hurt you?”

“No, not a bit.” As she stared at Claudio, using his hand to mop his brow of sweat, she noticed a person approaching them.

“Eek...” Rosemarie gasped and ran behind Claudio. It was the Archbishop, with his half-human, half-melted-lizard face. The melted portion of his face was even worse than usual today. She could practically smell a foul odor coming from it, which almost made her want to vomit.

“Are you safe, Prince Claudio?”

“Yes. I’m glad to see you are unscathed, as well, Archbishop Kastner.” Claudio held out his hand to Rosemarie, standing behind him, for consolation. She squeezed onto it tight. The large, slightly cool hand calmed her nerves.

“Goodness gracious, what a fiasco. And, of all times, when you’re entertaining the Crown Prince and Princess of Rivera... Could this be an attack against Rivera or toward our country?”

“Watch your tone. I won’t stand for disrespect.”

“A thousand apologies for speaking without due consideration. It would seem that this ordeal has me quite shaken up.” His tone of voice didn’t give the impression of being shaken up in the slightest. Hearing it made Rosemarie bite her lips.

The fact that he observed the disaster unfold and was not unsettled in the least meant that either he had guts to spare or he was absolutely confident that he would remain unharmed.

(If he were actually relieved, then he shouldn’t have that disfigured head.)

In spite of this fact, his face was still half-monster, so what did it all mean?

As she came to her conclusion, she squeezed Claudio’s hand and he shielded her shoulders with his arm.



“Apologies, Your Grace, but since my wife is frightened stiff, we will be retiring.”

“Ah, yes, I cannot say I can blame her for being frightened, to say the least. Just one last thing before you leave, Prince Claudio. There is something that I would like to inquire, so would you be so kind as to spare a moment?”

Just as he was about to leave, Claudio stopped in his tracks, clearly annoyed. Rosemarie felt the irritating thumping of her heart and pressed a hand to her chest.

“Why is it that you didn’t use your magic? Knowing you, Prince Claudio, boasting the strongest mana in the land, I would think you could have taken care of these ruffians in a matter of no time. Oh, which reminds me. I did not happen to see your familiar around, either. It has me quite concerned that perhaps you are not in the best of health. Or, maybe...” His half-human face curled its lips into an ugly smile.

“Maybe you have some sort of *issue* with your mana, Prince Claudio?”

Claudio stood there, silent, as he held Rosemarie close to his body. Rosemarie whimpered through her throat, bone-dry from anxiety.

If he had no mana, he couldn’t ascend to the throne.

This was the very reason Claudio had been keeping the theft of his mana a secret from everybody.

Despite that, he was being suspected by his most hated opposition, Archbishop Kastner, which made it that much worse.

“Would you mind answering my question and eliminating these concerns of mine?”

“—If that concerns you so much, you should arrange an inquiry. I’ll gladly take the stand.” There was no indication of anger in Claudio’s voice. He declared that as if it were nothing at all. Then, partially tucking Rosemarie under his arm, he headed out of the hall.

As they walked down the corridor, where people rushed passed them along the way, Rosemarie looked up at Claudio with concern.

“What if he actually takes you at your word and arranges an inquiry?”

“He can go ahead and do it. He wouldn’t say anything to fan the flames without preparation.” Rosemarie’s worries only compounded as she saw Claudio lift the corner of his mouth in a sardonic smirk, and she gripped onto his jacket tightly.

This most likely meant Claudio had something in store.

“Please don’t do anything too dangerous.”

“I’ll act accordingly.” Claudio looked slightly surprised, but soon squinted in a smile.

As she put her hand across her worried-filled chest, Rosemarie

anxiously frowned, unable to smile in return.

“Why is it that it is so *cool* in this *hothouse* even though it’s so very *hot* outside? That is extremely perplexing to me.”

Rosemarie, who was replanting roses into fresh pots, heard Heidi’s genuinely befuddled sigh and turned around with a smile. She took the watering can that Heidi was holding out for her and said her thanks.

“Thank you. I’ve heard the reason it’s cool in here is because magic is regulating the temperature. Otherwise, the plants would wither away.”

Apparently, building these sort of greenhouses was commonplace.

Thanks to her daily maintenance of the greenhouse Claudio had gifted her, it had improved considerably from the wild mess it had been on her first day.

Three days had passed since the evening gala attended by the Crown Prince and Princess of Rivera. The assailants had been identified as a group of assassins who specialized in hits on aristocrats and affluent individuals, and were known to take any job they were offered provided they were paid for it. Claudio had told Rosemarie that they were in the middle of tracking down the assassins’ employer.

After the Crown Prince and Princess of Rivera made their premature return back to their country, guard detail was bumped up. Even today, she passed by several knights in order to walk to the greenhouse. Incidentally, there were two bodyguards posted in front of the greenhouse door as they spoke.

(Still, I wonder if now is the time to be doing this, as though I don’t have a care in the world...)

She had thought of stopping her trips to the greenhouse. Claudio, amused by the idea, would have none of it, noting that she would likely pass out if she gave up her visits. So, despite feeling uneasy about it, Rosemarie took him up on his offer.

Heidi glanced at the knights and once again sighed.

“Even so, aren’t those knights outside feeling the heat?”

“Well, the entrance has the yew tree’s shade to shield them from the heat, so I would like to assume they’re okay.”

“They refuse to come inside even if you offer, too. Quite the stuffy individuals, I’d say...”

“I also feel overwhelmed with all these people around. For whatever reason, I feel like everyone is watching me like mad until I come here.” Whether because of there being so many knights on edge or the general tension in the air, Rosemarie didn’t fancy how high her odds of seeing a beast head had become.

“Princess, what you are wearing is to blame. Your appearance is unbecoming of a crown princess.”

“You may very well be right, but...”

Heidi smiled wryly at her, and Rosemarie looked down at what she was wearing. It was a plain olive-green dress with a full collar. There was hardly any trim on it, so it was safe for her to get dirty in. In fact, it was already covered with soil around the cuffs and front of the skirt.

“Even so, you have made it all the way here, so I would say you have made considerable progress.”

“Is it... progress? This greenhouse in disarray has just been calling me, that’s all. Isn’t that right, friend?” She addressed the rose she was in the middle of repotting. After being shown the greenhouse in such a deplorable state, she felt obligated to help it out in any way she could.

“You haven’t talked to flowers in such a long time, I’d almost forgotten you had that bad habit.” Heidi squinted in distaste, but Rosemarie continued to water the repotted plant in spite of that. Just then, she noticed a commotion from the entrance.

“What could that be...?”

The Imperial Guards that were standing on guard duty were having some sort of verbal dispute. Just as she stood up and locked eyes with Heidi, the greenhouse door swung open violently.

The people loudly marching in en masse weren’t the black-uniformed Imperial Guards, but another set of knights clad in white uniforms. They bumped into the potted plants on the shelves, knocking several to the ground and breaking them.

“Knights from The Second Order...?” These knights primarily stood guard outside the castle and upheld general order. For some reason, all of them had different beast heads and were glaring straight at Rosemarie.

She looked back at them, speechless, trying to contain her wildly-beating heart. A wolf-headed knight who seemed to be their captain then suddenly came to the forefront.

“Your Royal Highness Rosemarie. We are taking you into custody for the suspected assassination plot on His Royal Highness Claudio.”

“...Huh?” For a second, she didn’t comprehend what she was just told. The gears in Rosemarie’s mind stopped turning, and she stood there, still and silent. Heidi lashed out in outrage.

“What in *blazes* is the meaning of this?! The princess wouldn’t kill a fly, much less His Highness!”

“Be that as it may, we have received a tip that Her Royal Highness Rosemarie may have tried to poison His Royal Highness Claudio. After investigating, we have witnesses who say they were on the scene when His Highness collapsed, and we have come here for questioning.

Would you mind coming with us now?"

Rosemarie went pale in the face immediately. She put her shivering hand over her mouth.

(Do they mean... when Claudio drank the Kaola and passed out...?)

Yes, it was true that Kaola was poisonous to Claudio. However, no one, including herself, had any idea that would happen.

Nevertheless, that was an incident that no one outside of Alto, Edeltraud and Heidi should even know about, so how did this come to light?

"By witness, who do you..."

"An on-duty doctor and maid. They have recounted that they saw His Highness collapsed on the floor of your room when they were summoned by Imperial Guard Vice Captain Clausen after being informed that His Highness had fallen. They also recounted a half-drunk cup of tea on a nearby table." Basically, the doctor Alto brought and the caddy maid told what happened from that point.

Rosemarie took a step back, furiously shaking her head.

"You have it wrong. I wasn't trying to poison him!"

"We will listen to your account later." On the signal to take her away, a pair of knights—one with the head of a bear, the other with a light brown dog's head—grabbed Rosemarie by both arms. She saw the sharp teeth and long tongues from their partially-opened mouths. Even though her mind was going blank, terror still remained.

"...Eek. N-No. Let me go. Please. Don't touch me!"

"What are you doing?!" Claudio's enraged voice rang from behind the knights. The knights encircling Rosemarie all instantly parted. Rosemarie fell to her knees as the hands seizing her loosened their grip. Without a moment's delay, Heidi, who was being kept at bay, rushed over to her side and hugged the girl's shoulders.

"*What* is the meaning of this?" Claudio stormed up with anger in each step, standing in front of Rosemarie as she knelt on the ground in order to shield her. She looked up at that broad and reliable back with tears in her eyes.

"Her Highness the Crown Princess has been suspected of an assassination plot against you, Prince Claudio."

Claudio scoffed at the wolf-headed knight standing at attention in front of him.

"Where did this information come from?"

"We are not certain where it came from, but witnesses have said —"

"Not certain? And you're still trying to make an arrest? I will have you know that if these charges are false, then it doesn't matter how small of a nation compared to ours she hails from, it will mean an international incident. Are you prepared to take responsibility for

that?"

"Sir, I..." The knight was lost for words. His men weren't budging an inch, either, perhaps too flustered to do so.

"I have no recollection of being poisoned. However, you lot would probably believe your witness over the victim himself. Is that what you call working in my best interests?"

"Well, then..." The knight dropped his shoulders, relieved. Claudio's men started to approach Rosemarie, but he stared them down, stopping them.

"Is simply keeping lookout on my wife's room not good enough for you?"

"Charges are charges, sir, so..."

As he looked the distressed knight in the face, Claudio hesitated for a bit, but finally let out a huge sigh.

"—Fine. Go ahead and arrest the princess. However, you will treat her with care. Under no circumstances do you exert violence. When she comes back to me, if I see one bruise on her body—one *scratch* on her skin—consider yourself *gristle* between my *teeth*." Claudio's lips curled into a ferocious and savage smile. She could see a few of the robust knights backing up a few steps. They were undoubtedly seeing the prince with his lion head glaring right at them.

"Yes, we will make sure to abide by that." The humbled captain saluted, and the pair of knights who had grabbed Rosemarie before reached out for her once again. Claudio stood in their way and obstructed them.

"You don't touch her. I'll take her in. You just show me where."

The girl rose to her feet with Claudio's help, and they followed the captain out of the greenhouse. The knight who had grabbed her before brought up the rear. Her eyes were blinded by the strong light tanning the top of her head. Claudio helped prop her up by the arms because of her staggering. As he did, he stuffed something into her hand. (Huh? What is this...? A piece of paper?)

She tried to confirm what it was, but Claudio closed her hand around it. She looked at him doubtfully, and he smiled faintly back at her.

"Listen, whatever happens, don't admit to the crime. I'll have you free in no time. So, just believe in me and be patient."

Upon hearing Claudio's whispered yet reassuring voice, Rosemarie silently nodded in reply.

Rosemarie sat upon the bed and vacantly stared at the moonlight filtering in through the barred window.

It was her second day in the high-class prison in the nook of the

castle grounds. The piece of paper Claudio had handed to her, wrinkled from the many times she had read it over, lay on her lap.

(It gives me a little relief, but...)

Essentially, it said she didn't need to worry, and to sit tight since he had calculated that something to this effect would happen.

After the assault at the evening gala with the Crown Prince and Princess of Rivera, she had been anxious with the knowledge that Claudio had been hatching a plan. She'd never expected it would end up getting her wrapped up in things as well, though.

(The next time I see Prince Claudio, maybe I should give him a piece of my mind.)

If he knew thing would come to this, he should have given her a chance to prepare herself for it mentally. She figured this was a situation that was safe to get angry at. As always, Claudio failed to give her an adequate explanation.

Seeing as how Claudio couldn't come here, Fritz would come every morning to check up on her, but that still didn't ease the burden in her mind.

With a small sigh, she turned her eyes toward the door.

The thick wooden door was secured not only with a heavy-duty lock from the outside, but also with a Spell of Locking cast by a sorcerer. Thus, she was told never to touch it. The window was apparently the same, meaning touching it would result in a nasty burn on one's hand.

(But what if it dispels at my touch?)

Her trait was stealing mana, after all. So perhaps she could absorb the mana powering the Spell of Locking, like when she'd siphoned off the mana from that broom. However, even if that were possible, it wouldn't do much to change anything, given the current predicament she was in.

As she sat staring at the door, relieved at how surprisingly calm she was keeping, it gave a *click* and popped ajar.

"Huh...?" How had the door moved without her laying a finger on it? All she'd done was look at it. Disturbed, she started to get up for a closer look. However, before she even could, the prison door opened without a sound.

"...?!"

"And how might we be doing, Crown Princess?" Appearing in the doorway was the Archbishop with the half-melting lizard face—Kastner. He may have had a gentle smile across the human side of his face, but his appearance was monstrous and more frightening than anyone else.

(It's okay, it's okay, Prince Claudio told me to have faith and wait for him.)

Rosemarie glared resolutely at Kastner, holding back the urge to vomit due to the pungent smell drifting through the air.

“Goodness gracious, I would have never expected you to poison Prince Claudio. Women can be ferocious under those docile faces.”

“I did *not* poison him.”

“Oh, my, you do not seem to know when to give up. The witness was a doctor who has been a presence in this castle far longer than you. Whose statement do you think will be more believable?”

Rosemarie frowned in frustration. What Kastner said wasn’t incorrect. As far as credibility went, the doctor had her beat.

“If you truly were trying to poison him, you were quite close to doing so. Then again, at the moment it doesn’t matter whether you poisoned him or not. —Take her away.” Kastner turned back around and gave a signal with a jerk of his chin. The knights who had been waiting behind him, wearing rather unfamiliar uniforms with gold embroidery, entered the room. Before the shock could even settle in, both of Rosemarie’s arms were wrenched behind her back.

“What are you doing?!” Try as she might to squirm her way into an escape, she wasn’t budging. Another knight then forced a gag in her mouth. With a guilty expression paired with a slight frown, the knight tied her hands behind her back. Suffocating and confused, Rosemarie pointed her tear-stained eyes toward Kastner. The Archbishop’s lips curled into a grin.

“Prince Claudio has been devoting quite a lot of attention to you. It would be quite cumbersome if you were, by some off chance, already bearing his child.”

(Bear... a child...?)

Claudio had wed her to retrieve his mana, not because he wanted an heir. However, obtaining an heir would have been the usual reason. She knew the situation she was in, but she could feel her cheeks flushing in shame. The girl furiously shook her head, to which Kastner raised an eyebrow, surprised.

“I can’t say I would expect you to deny that. Well, even so, you shall be seeing your way out of Prince Claudio’s life. You see, I want to make sure there is next to zero chance of anything going awry. In order for our candidate to become crown prince, that is.”

She turned her attention to a loud thud coming from the entrance and saw an uncaring knight carry in a wine barrel.

(Are they going to kill me...?!)

Were they going to kill her, stuff her inside of that barrel, and bury it out in the middle of nowhere? Had Claudio managed to account for this, too?

Her breathing started getting erratic as her blood curdled. She spurred her shivering body in order to shake off the knight’s hands,

but their powerful arms lifted her up.

“...?!”

They crammed her into the wine barrel, causing her to slam her rear inside. She bore the pain, and looked up to find that the lid was being placed back on the barrel. The knight held the lid, not saying a single word and biting his lip. Seeing that made her believe that this probably wasn't something he wanted to do.

“If I were to have you killed here, dealing with the aftermath would be quite the arduous affair. Hence why you will be running away from here in fear of your crime being investigated, wander into the Forbidden Forest, and go into hiding. At least, that is how the narrative shall be set. But, come now. If you have an appropriate amount of mana, you won't go missing. Even if you just end up returning to Volland, that will suffice.”

Her eyes widened upon hearing the words “Forbidden Forest.” She had been told that she got lost there once as a child and Claudio helped rescue her, so navigating out of the forest would have been nigh impossible.

“Aah, that reminds me. Prince Claudio's inquiry will be tomorrow. I know this no longer concerns you, but why don't you say a little prayer for your husband's safety?”

Before she could even attempt to struggle her way to her feet, the lid was closed on her. Darkness and the mellow aroma of wine encircled her, and the feeling of entrapment overcame her and took her breath away.

The barrel rattled and shook during transport, only stopping after an unspecific amount of time had passed with her locked in the cask.

Unable to keep track of time in the darkness, Rosemarie focused intently on any sounds from outside the barrel.

Her cries for help went unquestioned by anybody, possibly because of the gag in her mouth restricting her from being heard from the outside, resulting in nothing more than a sore throat.

(That prison was on the outskirts of the castle, so it should be close to the Forbidden Forest...)

That was most likely how he was easily able to transport a wine barrel unnoticed.

“Hitch the horse to the carriage and let it loose.”

Rosemarie pricked her ears and listened closely. The sentence she heard sent shivers down her spine.

(Huh? Let it loose? Carriage?)

Clueless as to what they were trying to do, she pressed her ears closer to the wood in hopes of hearing something more. Then, suddenly, the barrel flipped around. Her body slammed against the sides. A feeling like vertigo made her feel almost physically ill.

Despite that, there was no stop to the oscillations; rather, they started to get more intense. It was almost as if she were riding on a runaway carriage.

(Have they really hitched the horse to the carriage and let it loose into the Forbidden Forest?)

If that were indeed the case, then this would continue until either the horse itself stopped or the barrel fell from the carriage.

The clacking of the horse's hooves echoed steadily as the wheels rolled over the uneven ground, occasionally springing up when they ran over divots or stones in their path.

She curled herself up in the fetal position in order to protect her head. As she did, the barrel tilted on a remarkably huge angle.

Ka-thunk. The barrel apparently fell to the ground.

Around and around the barrel spun, eventually hitting something and coming to a stop.

(Am I saved...? Oh, it's open!)

When she slowly opened her tightly shut eyes, a thin ray of light shone into her once completely dark field of view.

With her hands still tied behind her back, she squirmed around like a caterpillar to pry open the lid. At the same time she rid herself of the gag, which had loosened with the movements of her jaw.

(I'm glad I was able to get that off easily, but I feel that might've been tied rather loosely... It could be that the knight was taking pity on me.)

The reluctant expression on the knight's face she saw just before the cask's lid closed popped into her mind. The ropes binding her hands weren't tied very tightly either, and felt removable with a little effort.

Rosemarie looked around her with a sigh of relief, then gulped, dumbfounded.

She was in a forest cast in the sullen shroud of night. Now she realized the light that shone through the barrel lid was the moonlight peering through the cracks of the evergreen branches.

Maybe it was a result of being locked up in the pitch darkness up until a few seconds ago, but she was able to survey the area well enough even with the shaky moonlight. Just as she had expected, the transport carriage and the damaged barrel were lying on the ground nearby. There were marks from where the horse had been hitched, but it was nowhere to be seen, possibly having run off.

Looking at it, she shuddered at the thought of how if the collision was any stronger, she might have hit somewhere vital and died.

"I have to get back."

It was unlikely that Claudio had calculated her being dumped off somewhere like this.

Unless she got herself back to the castle, she would be convicted of poisoning Claudio for certain, and she didn't want the blame to befall her homeland—or, more importantly, her family.

The vestiges of Claudio in his youth ran across her mind.

Claudio may have rescued her back then, but he wasn't coming this time. Reason being that, tomorrow, he was to attend an inquiry accusing him of the presence or absence of his mana. Even if he wasn't, right now, Claudio didn't have any mana to begin with, so he couldn't come into the forest.

Help wasn't coming, which meant...

"I'll get back on my own. I'll get back and shock everyone," Rosemarie said as if trying to convince herself. She then started to slowly press her way forward, following the wheel tracks that she managed to make out in the grass.

When Claudio heard the news from the mole-bearing clergyman, he abandoned any hope of comprehending the implications.

"Wait, Your Highness. Where are you going? You can't very well go into the Forbidden Forest," Fritz said reproachfully, which allowed Claudio to realize that he was leaving his quarters without even thinking. That was when rage seethed from deep within his core. A growl rumbled from his throat.

It was early morning on the day of the inquiry when Fritz came running into Claudio's room with a look of dread on his face. He dived into the room as he was finishing up yet another sleepless night.

"...Damn that repugnant Archbishop!" Those same words that he'd spat out were coming right back to bite him. He had calculated that he might have abducted Rosemarie off somewhere, but...

"And he abandoned her in the Forbidden Forest of all places? The cretin!" That was no better than a gradual death sentence.

Without mana, one was bound to go missing in the Forbidden Forest. Some said it was because you would go out of your mind. Others said the Sacred Beast was still very much alive in the forest, and those who got lost there became a sacrifice to it. And since no normal human has ever tried going in and coming back, it wasn't clear what would happen in the forest.

"I wasn't careful myself. Doesn't matter how busy I was running around with preparations with the inquiry, I should've done a better job sticking around her. At the morning service, one of the paladins that keep to the Archbishop was looking strange, so I pressed him for info and that's when I heard the shocking news that they dumped her off in the Forbidden Forest..." Fritz said, his face looking downcast in a rare display. Claudio moved his eyes away from him and swiftly sat

down on the sofa.

“...Rosemarie has my mana. I don’t know how the forest will discern that, but if it recognizes her as having mana, then I think she’ll be able to navigate her way out of the forest, but...” He put a hand on his forehead and racked his brain. Fritz knitted his brow and looked toward the forest.

“With my piddling mana, all I’d do is get lost... Is Master Edel still cooping themselves up?”

“Yes, caught up in analysis of the Kaola. For the inquiry, we’ve prepared it so Master Edel will endow their mana using that branch as a medium, but...” He pointed to a small yew branch atop the desk. The yew tree was not only a ward against evil, but also carried mana, albeit in miniscule amounts. Claudio had been concealing it in his pocket and using it as a medium, giving the illusion that he had been using magic and casting spells.

This was altogether different from the time that Edeltraud tricked him into thinking that Rosemarie was missing. Back then, it was clear that guilt was the emotion that won out in the end. This time, though, emotions like panic and loss were coming and going through his heart, culminating in rage. That rage made his hands tremble and clench tightly into fists.

“In any case, Your Highness, don’t you move. If you don’t make it to today’s inquiry on time, then they’ll think that you’re absent because you don’t have any mana. Got that? I won’t approve of you relinquishing the throne in disgrace *on top* of being accused of faking that you have mana when you don’t.” Fritz warned Claudio in a deep tone. His normally laid-back attitude had taken a back seat, and bits of his prestige as a clergyman reared their head.

“—You’re an idiot, you know that?” Serving under someone that was as much of a handful as Claudio of his own volition—he had thought this since the very beginning, but that in itself was idiotic.

“I think of a lot of things, being the idiot that I am, sir. And I don’t want to see Her Highness in tears, either,” Fritz said, shrugging his shoulders. It was a sight that calmed Claudio’s nerves a tad.

“Rosemarie ended up safe even though she wandered into the Forbidden Forest as a child. However, the same can’t be guaranteed this time around.” Claudio didn’t want to be so irresponsible as to stop caring about the loss of his position as crown prince. If that were to happen, Rosemarie herself would undoubtedly be sadder about it than anyone.

In attempts to quell the vortex of panic and rage in his heart, he shut his eyes. Then he took a deep breath.

“—Let’s prepare for the inquiry. Once we’ve squared that away, we will do whatever it takes to search for Rosemarie.”

Greeted by the bright morning sun, Rosemarie opened her eyes. Grating pain coursed through various spots on her body as she tried to move, but she managed to crawl away from the base of the yew tree she had slept against.

“I wonder if it ended up warding off evil...?”

She had done nothing but walk in hopes of getting out of the forest since last night, but it didn’t take long before her body, lacking in regular exercise, was bellowing in agony.

Remembering the yew tree planted at the entrance of the greenhouse she received from Claudio, she huddled up to a yew tree that she spotted and rested. It ended up relieving a lot of her fatigue.

Apparently, so long as no people were around, she was bold enough to sleep outdoors.

A few hours’ rest was enough to take a considerable load off her shoulders. She hadn’t put much consideration into her own stamina due to the panic of it all, but she should have been a little bit more careful.

(All that aside, this looks nasty...)

Red blood oozed from both of her wrists as they were exposed to the bright sun overhead. Thanks to her continuously moving her hands as she walked in order to remove the ropes binding her arms together, the ropes loosened and she freed herself. And while she knew there was nothing she could do about the pain in her wrists, it wasn’t until she was able to see in the daylight that she realized just how bad it looked.

After removing her hair ribbon and bandaging up her right hand, she had a look around. From what she could immediately see, there was nothing but evergreen trees and tall weeds. The wheel tracks that she had followed last night were nowhere to even be seen.

Hopelessness seeped into her heart for a second before she fixed her attitude and rose to her feet. She broke off a twig from the evil-warding yew tree and tucked it into the lace adorning the front of her dress in place of a good-luck charm.

“I wonder if the inquiry has started...” Claudio had said he was prepared so that even if there was an inquiry, he would be fine. Although her concerns remained, she believed that he would come out on top.

The real issue here was herself.

It would have been great if she could bust out of the forest based solely on drive alone, but there was no way things would go so smoothly.

“Well, I was told that the last time I was lost here, I climbed the

tallest tree in the Forbidden Forest...”

She tried looking up and, sure enough, she was able to spot a tree considerably taller than the trees in the area from where she stood. The thought process of her childhood was starting to fall into place. She most likely thought that if she climbed that tree, she would be able to see the castle. The fact that she’d hatched up the same idea even now was, at least to her, a testament to how dumb she was.

“It’s pretty incredible how little progress I’ve made,” she said with a wry smile, walking forward.

She wasn’t very far from where she wanted to go. But, more importantly, the hem of her dress was getting caught and making it hard for her to walk. The idea popped into her head to rip it and make it shorter, but whether she herself was too weak or the cloth of the dress was stronger than it looked, she wasn’t able to make a tear in it.

(It would be great if I could use Prince Claudio’s mana as well... That way, I could get straight home even if I were dumped off somewhere.)

Upon finally reaching the side of the massive tree, a thought struck her that hadn’t crossed her mind this entire time, partly due to exhaustion. Rosemarie perked her head up, as if taken aback herself.

“It’s not like I can’t use it... right?” There was nothing saying she *couldn’t* use it even though she didn’t know *how* to use it. She stared at both her palms, squeezed into them tight, and—succumbed to embarrassment before giving up.

Rosemarie shook her head and tried to switch over to planning how she would scale the tree that stood before her, but that was when she saw something white poking out from behind the giant tree.

“What...? Is that... an animal tail?”

This entire time, she hadn’t even heard a bird chirping, much less caught sight of a wild animal. The forest was draped in such bizarre silence that it was almost as if all life had died off, giving it a slightly unsettling vibe.

That was the sole reason why her heart pounded upon glimpsing at the beast-like something-or-other she had never seen before. However, at the same time, fear reared its ugly head.

(Is it really just a normal animal?)

This was the Forbidden Forest, inviolable grounds. The very place where the remains of the sacred beast were buried. There was a reason why those without mana would end up getting lost inside.

Her heart thumped and thumped. Rosemarie didn’t know if she was being afflicted by fear or anxiety, but the bit of curiosity mixed in was prodding her on, so she tiptoed over and slowly peeked behind the tree.

“Huh...?”

There was nothing there. She had seen the white tail there up until a second ago, but the moment she looked on the other side of the tree, there was nothing. Even after scanning the area, she couldn't find anything—just shadows cast by the leaves swaying in the breeze.

"Maybe I was just seeing things, then?" She wasn't willing to accept that, regardless, so she touched the part of the tree trunk where the animal would have been.

—It only took an instant.

Her body became buried in the trunk.

All light had faded and her vision was covered in darkness, just like the time she was stuffed into the barrel. Almost as though she was stuck in a quagmire, she was unable to keep her body from slowly sinking in, and soon it became hard to breathe.

Was this the reason why all those people went missing?

(If I keep sinking, I'm going to die!)

She flailed her hand around like a woman possessed, hoping there was something to grab a hold of—until she found herself spat out somewhere different with a *plop*.

—"Yow."

—"Huh? Volland princess." A familiar yet deadpan voice rushed into her ears. That form of address could have only belonged to one person. Rosemarie lifted her head, stunned. Her eyes widened in disbelief.

"Mage Edel...?!"

The gloomy hooded sorcerer cocked their head in confusion as they sat in their chair.

"Why are you here, Mage Edel?"

"Should be asking you that. Volland princess, how did you get in here?"

As Rosemarie sat on the ground, dumbfounded, a sweet aroma grazed her nose out of nowhere, making her check around. She was in a circular room that was about Rosemarie's armspan doubled in width. The roundabout wall was filled with bookshelves packed full with books. It wasn't clear how one was meant to get in or out, as there were neither windows nor doors. Atop the desk in the middle of the room were several bottles and ceramic containers of all shapes and sizes with vapors billowing out of them.

"The smell of Kaola...?"

"Yes, Kaola."

"So, *this* is where you've been analyzing the Kaola, then...?" Still not understanding any of what was happening, Rosemarie stood up and approached Edeltraud. The sorcerer put their gloves back on.

"Do you know where this is?"

"...Huh? Uh, well..."

Seeing that she was stammering and unable to answer the question, Edeltraud drew a circle with their finger.

“Center of Forbidden Forest. Directly under where sacred beast rests. All those who come near eaten by sacred beast’s dreams. I’m guard of sacred beast’s dreams. This is the guard post.”

“Sacred beast’s dream...?” Those words sparked images of the animal tail she saw near the big tree in her mind for whatever reason. (I thought it was white... but maybe it was *silver*...?)

By “eaten,” did they mean by that mythical silver-haired beast?

“You have Claudio’s mana. Probably why you’re safe.”

Rosemarie had been taken in by Edeltraud’s bizarre explanation, but her memory clicked upon hearing Claudio’s name.

“The inquiry! Do you know what happened with Prince Claudio’s inquiry?!” she asked, pressing Edeltraud for answers. The sorcerer tilted their head, perplexed.

“Want to go to Claudio?”

“Yes, I do! But, first, what were the results of the inquiry?!” Considering how carefree Edeltraud was acting, she assumed that Claudio was in the clear and deemed to possess mana, but she was uneasy, nonetheless.

“Haven’t been produced yet. Should be starting about now. Mm-hmm, I probably don’t need to go.” As Rosemarie stood there, wide-eyed, Edeltraud took the opportunity to slide up to her.

“I will take you there, but can you help me with little something I wanted you to test?”

“Well, if it’s something that I can do, then...” Slightly fearful and on-guard, she awkwardly nodded. Edeltraud’s ideas were always polarized between good and bad.

“Right now, Seed of Mana-Sealing in Claudio is in accelerated state. Going berserk in craving nutrients by way of mana. Therefore, giving mana should pacify it. Actually, been getting better by physical contact with you. When people take in nutrients, usually by mouth. So, streaming mana from mouth probably best. Most effective. Same when he drank Kaola tea. So, consider you are bundle of mana.”

“Yes, okay?”

“In other words, if you——Claudio, then mana might return to normal.”

“...Pardon?”

She felt like she just heard a word that was hard to comprehend. Edeltraud looked at her, confused.

“Didn’t hear? Give Claudio a——”

“I *cannot!*” Her face flushed red in shame. No, her whole body was hot, so she might’ve been getting red right down to the tip of her toes.

“I could never do such a thing with Prince Claudio. I simply

cannot!” If she were to do that, he would surely come to dislike her. Even if it were a compromise, she was still, at her core, the detestable person who stole his mana. She thought she would do anything to help, but she also didn’t want Claudio to hate her.

“Don’t miss Claudio?”

“That isn’t what I said!” she replied, half out of reflex, which caused her to come to her senses. Apparently, she wanted to get back to Claudio’s side so badly that she would think about how bad she missed him when questioned if she missed him.

“U-Um, will just a quick one do...?” Her face was still so red that even she herself noticed, but she braced herself, figuring that the alternative was better than being stranded here and not knowing what became of Claudio.

She caught a glimpse of a smile across Edeltraud’s face.

“That’s fine. Alright, let’s go.” Edeltraud plucked off the yew branch Rosemarie stuck in the front of her dress earlier.

In the blink of an eye, the thin and scattered leaves in the sorcerer’s hand were picked up by a wind seemingly out of nowhere, then rained down from overhead.

Her wide-open eyes were quickly covered in darkness and her body started to quake. It was a sensation almost like falling from somewhere high up, where your gut felt like it was being pulled down. She found herself closing her eyes as a result.

“If mana doesn’t return, I’ll handle things. Don’t get too worked up.” Edeltraud’s voice started to gradually fade off into the distance, eventually getting erased by the wooshing sounds of the wind.

Everything abruptly lit up, and, at the same time, she felt herself cast off elsewhere.

“...!!” Rosemarie banged her shoulder, letting out a small groan.

(Three times just today... I’m going to bruise up at this rate... And will Heidi ever have a fit...)

She scanned the area while getting over the pain to find that she was under the yew tree growing next to the greenhouse Claudio gave her.

“I’ve... made it back to the castle?” Rather than being happy over making it back, she was more preoccupied with the huge leap she made from being inside the forest to being right near the castle. Although still in a perplexed state of mind, Rosemarie quickly rose to her feet.

(Where are they holding the inquiry?)

Spurring her shaking legs into action, she ran across the courtyard. She entered the building, almost tripping over herself, and bumped into the knights standing guard outside.

“Oh, Her Royal Highness?!”

“Do you know where they are holding the inquiry?!” She questioned, pulling at the knight frozen in surprise. Rosemarie was worried what kind of situation she was in at the castle at the moment, but it was more efficient to ask right here instead of running all over creation looking. The desperate ferocity on Rosemarie’s face made the knight hesitantly open his mouth.

“In the grand hall... but—”

“I thank you.” She didn’t wait for him to finish his sentence, and instead started running toward the grand hall. While she thanked her lucky stars that it was somewhere she familiar with, her heart jumped at the sound of footsteps following her from behind.

“Your Royal Highness, wait right there!”

“Her Highness has escaped from prison!”

Apparently, she hadn’t been portrayed as having run away last night. Although she was relieved to know that, she couldn’t afford to let herself get caught now.

She lifted up the fringe of her dress so that her legs wouldn’t get tangled and made her way toward the hall, albeit on a path that was bound to get her lost. However, as she did, more and more knights started chasing her down.

(No good! I’m going to be caught!)

It was when she turned the corner, half-crying, that it happened. She collided with someone. The person quickly held her up as she bounced off and flew backwards.

“I’ve caught you, Your Highness!” The deer-headed knight squeezed her arm tight.

There were so many people in attendance in the grand hall that there was barely room to fit everyone.

“Questioning the Status of Crown Prince Claudio’s Mana.”

Three days ago, the announcement of the inquiry’s purpose throughout the castle surprised and astonished people, while a handful of people trembled in delight.

One of the people trembling in delight was Archbishop Kastner, the person trying to claim a spot by the throne and the person beside whom Fritz was currently standing. As he stood there, he unintentionally overheard what the people around had to say.

“Wasn’t he supposed to be the second coming of the sacred beast?”

“If you think about it, His Highness doesn’t actively use magic. Have they been pulling the wool over our eyes?”

“I mean, most other sorcerers are the same way, aren’t they? It’s just that Archmagus Edeltraud uses it way too frivolously.”

“If he doesn’t have mana, who’s going to take the throne as crown

prince? The right to the next successor will surely—”

The unfiltered chatter being exchanged around him made Fritz sigh on the inside while keeping his face neutral.

(Boy, I wish they’d shut up. Though, the person on the throne as crown prince possibly being mana-less is an unprecedented event, so I guess I can’t blame ’em.)

Inquiries were held when acceding the position of crown prince. At the time, Claudio still had his mana and his head wasn’t a lion’s. He probably never expected to lose his mana afterward.

The clamorous grand hall suddenly went so silent you could hear a pin drop.

Claudio stepped through the royal entrance.

His firm and youthful build was clad in black knight garb, and his head—that of a silver lion. The regal way in which he walked in, without an ounce of nervousness, made you want to naturally take to your knee and bow. And in actuality, like an ebbing wave, the aristocrats and bureaucrats in the hall started to take to their knees.

Fear and reverence coupled with doubts and suspicion. A plethora of emotions filled the hall.

(I suppose it’s for the best the royal wife isn’t here.)

Rosemarie would probably have fainted if she saw this landscape. Probably nothing but beast heads, left and right. It was the only thing you could consider a *lucky* circumstance out of her disappearance, if you even dared.

King Baltzar was the final person to make his entrance, and he sat upon the throne, commencing the inquiry.

Six candles were set on the large candelabra that was transported into the middle of the hall.

“We would like you to light each of the candles on this, Prince Claudio. If you do, the status of your mana will be clear as day,” explained Archbishop Kastner within the pins-and-needles atmosphere of the hall. In order to bar any outside interference from sorcerers other than Claudio, their attendance had been banned.

(Yes, *just* sorcerers.)

Claudio caught sight of Fritz, with a look of innocence on his face, standing behind Kastner.

There were people who didn’t have great enough mana to become a sorcerer like Fritz, and there were also people who would never try to be a sorcerer, as well. There were probably some of those people among the many assembled in the hall as well.

(—I’m counting on you, Master Edel.)

Claudio uncharacteristically prayed to the normally aloof sorcerer.

He held his hand out toward the rightmost candle. The clamorous hall once again filled itself to the brim with nail-biting tension.

—There was a pause for a few seconds, but the wick remained unlit.

Even the people who were optimistic at first were gradually starting to cast eyes of doubt on him, and their whispers got louder.

Claudio didn't budge an inch regardless.

(Master Edel... were you so wrapped up in research that you forgot about the inquiry? Or maybe...)

Normally, whenever Claudio were to use magic, Edeltraud would be close by to use it in his stead. But when it came to using it from a distance like this, it wasn't likely that even the archmagus, who used magic and spells willy-nilly, would be able to pull something like this off.

"It would appear that candles are quite *tricky* to light, yes? This candle might very well be tampered with. Let us give it a light just to make sure." Kastner chuckled with a bounce of his shoulders. He approached the candle and beckoned a chamberlain over with a flame.

A warm orange fire burned, and Claudio gritted his molars ever so slightly.

(This is bad, eh...?)

Fritz, who was standing by Kastner's immediate side, shot Claudio a panicked look. If Fritz strained himself, he probably could have lit it, but Claudio let out a big sigh in lieu of a nod back.

"Change the candle. Who were these prepped by and where? You said that they might have been tampered with, didn't you? These are tools for a very serious inquiry. It should be common sense that they are not tampered with, but how can you say that for sure?" Claudio let out a deep chortle. The angry-sounding chortle terrified the chamberlain next to him so greatly, they dropped the flame they were holding. Kastner stamped it out, expressionless.

"A pathetic display that only—"

"Claudio." King Baltzar, who had been silently overseeing the turn of events up until this point, interrupted Kastner mid-thought. His voice, though not forceful, naturally drew one's ears toward it.

"If you have your doubts, then use the candles on the wall. Acceptable, Archbishop?" The king pointed at the candles set up all around the hall, then cast his eyes upon Kastner.

The two of them saluted with a hand to their chests, at which point the chamberlain prepared to fetch the candles on the wall.

Claudio involuntarily patted his chest. He was hoping Edeltraud would successfully establish the link he needed with them in the meantime.

Once the chamberlain plucked off the first candle, the sound of many people running around was heard from outside the hall.

“What is this about?” Kastner knitted his brows in suspicion. The people in the hall made a stir and chattered.

The rushed-sounding footsteps got closer. Then, the door of the hall opened, making a sound so loud it seemed almost as if it would shatter into pieces.

—“Prince Claudio!” It was Alto who flung the door wide open. Practically stumbling from behind him was someone clad in a filthy dress, bruised all over and looking as if she had been dragged through the mud—none other than Crown Princess Rosemarie.

—“Prince Claudio!” Rosemarie rushed into the hall, timidly minding the massive number of eyes all staring at her at once, but pushing past that and stepping inside. Startled, the attendees of the inquiry all cleared a path for her. Or, more accurately, they all backed away trying to avoid her.

“Rosemarie?!”

She saw Claudio trying to make his way toward her in wide-eyed shock, and tears welled in her eyes in relief.

Rosemarie jumped into Claudio’s arms as he stretched them out toward her, almost falling over himself. Without a moment to even catch her breath, she pressed her lips against Claudio’s.

—“?! ”

“I have missed you so much.” She quickly parted lips and huddled herself up to Claudio, whose cheeks were crimson and expression utterly baffled.

“In other words, if you kiss Claudio, then mana might return to normal.”

That was Edeltraud’s suggested idea. It was an experiment to return Claudio’s mana.

She couldn’t lift her head, and her heart was throbbing so hard it made her feel as if it were going to pop out of her chest at any moment, causing her to feel dizzy.

(Please, return to normal.)

She squeezed onto Claudio’s clothes with a prayer. That was when he grabbed her shoulders even harder.



“...Hah.”

Claudio's face wrenched as if suffocating and he thrashed his head about like a beast.

“Prince Claudio?!”

“Your Highness!”

Alto had come to their side sometime in the interim and helped pry Rosemarie from Claudio, who was gripped to the girl so hard he was likely to crush her shoulders.

The person she'd run into as she fled the castle guards was Alto. By now, though, she was starting to feel terrible about how many times he'd had to bail her out.

Claudio shivered dramatically once again, but soon took a deep breath and slowly lifted his head. Without even wiping the sweat from his brow, those blue eyes stared at Rosemarie full of confusion.

—Just then, the clamor turned into an uproar.

“His Highness's face...”

“It no longer... looks like the sacred beast?”

“Prince Claudio's face is human again!”

As several people shouted and their cries echoed through the hall, Rosemarie looked up at Alto, who was holding her up.

“Is his face really back to normal?”

“Yes, milady. It most certainly is!” Alto replied, beaming with a proud smile as his voice trembled in joy. Rosemarie looked at Claudio, touching his own face, and she was moved to tears.

With his face still tense as if he had seen something unbelievable, Claudio swept his hand across the air.

The candles on the candelabra in the middle of the hall were lit all at once. The candles that were arranged on the wall also lit up, one by one, with a blue mana-fueled flame. Claudio waved his hand once more, but, this time, the flames changed in color to a dark red.

(His mana... it's back?)

Rosemarie was so comforted by this that she sank to the floor, weak in the knees.

“Are you okay?” Claudio quickly extended his arm and took her into his embrace.

“T-Thank goodness...” As she wrapped her arms around his neck, the tears welled in her eyes fell down her cheeks. The worry she had was far greater than the temporary sense of shame she felt—worried about the possibility of nothing happening because of her kiss, or it causing his condition to degrade more.

“I'm not very sure how, but it looks like my mana is back. — Thank you,” he whispered to her, choking her up. However, he let go of her faster than she could bask in the sentiment and nod her head. With a fearless smile, Claudio turned around.

“Now, then. As you can plainly see, I have my mana. More importantly, I am trying to piece together exactly *why* the princess, who should still be detained, has shown up here looking as disheveled as she is. Any clues, Kastner?” Claudio’s interjection drew Rosemarie’s eyes over to the other side and she gasped.

(It’s not back to normal? But, why...?)

Kastner’s face was still in the same demonic state of being half melting lizard and half human. If Claudio’s mana returned to him, then she should not have been able to see that.

“Yes, ‘why’ is the question that *I* would like to be asking here.” A smirk crossed his demonic face. Those reptilian and human eyes both glared straight at her, causing Rosemarie to cringe in fear, but she opened her mouth, regardless.

“T-The Archbishop abandoned me in the Forbidden Forest as I was being detained. He said it would be a problem should I bear a child...”

—“Your Highness, whatever are you saying? If you were abandoned in the Forbidden Forest, there would be no way you could have returned. I would appreciate it if you would not falsely accuse me for an escape that you made on your own.”

“It is not false! Last night, I was—”

“Rosemarie.” Claudio’s consoling voice hushed her up. She looked at him, dissatisfied, as if asking why he wouldn’t let her explain herself, but Claudio gave a sweet smile as his only reply. He then turned back to face Kastner.

“The princess has not uttered a single falsehood. These people have testified to that being fact. Fritz.”

“Yes, Your Royal Highness Claudio.” Fritz bowed respectfully, and from behind him came the knights clad in the gold-embroidered uniforms who had shoved Rosemarie into the wine barrel as she was still being detained in the prison.

“These gentlemen were unable to bear the torment of conscience and came to me for penance. Archbishop, as a man of the church, I cannot simply overlook you involving paladins for your own agenda. Oh, perhaps I should bring forth these, too, while I’m at it.” Fritz pulled out several notes from his breast pocket.

“I took the liberty of doing some investigating per Prince Claudio’s instructions... And what turned up was: suspected embezzlement of state church contributions, bribes to bureaucratic personnel, violence and bodily harm toward the maid staff. —And the list goes on, but would you care to share your side of the story?” Fritz said with a complacent smile. Kastner gritted his molars in frustration.

“Fritz, how dare you...”

The uproar of the crowd composed of looks and cries of disapproval rained down on Kastner.

Even though Rosemarie knew the various beastly glares that only she could see weren't directed at her, they still sent a shiver down her spine and made her feel sick. Claudio stroked that same shivering back softly and gently with one hand.

"Kastner, what were you planning to do after I was deemed mana-less? You cannot become the king of this nation without mana. In order to receive the right to be heir to the throne, you must have both the lineage and the mana. Can the candidate you hoped to back claim both?"

The human side of Kastner's face was bathed in hatred, and scores of scales on the melted lizard portion fell off as he opened his mouth wide. A forked tongue popped out from the inside of his red mouth. He grabbed the nearby candelabra and tried to swing the blunt object at Claudio, but before the knights had a chance to try to stop him, Claudio quickly and easily stopped him instead.

"Mana this, mana that! Shut your impudent mouth about mana, brat! That mere shell of a contrived law was made during this nation's inception just so that sorcerers would preserve their bloodlines. A king can be perfectly suitable even without your blasted mana." Kastner growled in reply. Claudio cast his eyes in pity at the man as he murmured:

"I figured as much. You really don't know the reason why mana is necessary for acceding to the throne."

While it was unlikely he would try to attack Claudio again, Kastner's arm tensed up. His muddled, dark eyes were tinged slightly with confusion.

"This castle was constructed in order to keep the Forbidden Forest in check. The castle's mana is pivotal. Should the king be mana-less, the forest will spread further and further. The capital would be completely engulfed and eventually fall to ruin."

"That cannot be..."

"You're qualified to say it's impossible? You, the person who doesn't know a thing about the mystic arts? You can say that for certain?" Claudio pressed for answers, but Kastner did nothing but clam up in frustration. Claudio smiled triumphantly, unhanding Kastner's arm. After being abruptly tossed aside, Kastner staggered a bit before regaining his footing. He continued to glare with hatred at Claudio nevertheless.

"What you have been trying to do would equate to a treasonous plot to destroy the nation if not given proper discretion." From Claudio's body, a white shimmering haze rose up, and the freshly lit flames of the candles all wavered despite there not being any wind.

"On top of that, you plotted regicide against the princess. Before you are judged before the law, I am going to judge you *myself*!" The

amorphous haze started to take form. Suddenly, the small flames of the candles erupted into practical inferno. What showed up in the center of the hall, parting the flames, was a creature with a gallant lion head and body and curled ram horns. Its back, lurched in an intimidating posture, housed a pair of elegant wings.

“... the sacred beast, the Silver Lion?!”

Its pelt looked far too soft to be an illusion, and the force of wind from the harsh flap of its wings seemed very real. It left Rosemarie awestruck.

The sacred beast let out a thunderous roar. That roar rattled the atmosphere, invoking awe and fear from the onlookers’ very core. As the crowd stood frozen in place, Kastner turned heel with a frantic look on his face.

“After him,” came the cold utterance from Claudio’s mouth. Hearing his instructions, the Silver Lion chased after Kastner as he ran toward the exit. The Silver Lion pounced toward Kastner, who was trying his best to escape while stumbling over himself.

“Stop! You vile monster...! Stay back, stay back, stay back! Aaaaaaaaah!!”

The sacred beast opened its gigantic mouth wide and swallowed the Archbishop’s head whole.

Shrieks echoed throughout the room. Those who sank to the floor in a daze, those who were trying to run away in a panic—everyone was in fear of Claudio.

“Prince Claudio... how could you...” Rosemarie clasped onto Claudio’s tunic with shivering fingers. He responded with a smile.

“Look closely.”

The sacred beast started to dissolve like a clearing fog. Left in its wake was the form of Archbishop Kastner, his mind in an absolute daze with his eyes partially rolled up into his head. Upon noticing that, the crowd’s confusion gradually quelled, and someone called the knights to take him into custody.

“He will be out of commission for a while.”

“That was *still* taking things too far!” She looked at Claudio as he smiled pleasantly with a judging eye. The Archbishop was probably unconscious. She could see the castle guard knights carting the limp body of Kastner off, carrying him by both arms.

Claudio watched calmly as Kastner was taken off into custody. Then, he began instructing those around him. Rosemarie noticed all the people still left in the hall focusing their curious eyes upon Claudio as he spoke.

(Oh, that’s right. The majority of people here are only seeing Prince Claudio’s human face for the first time...)

He was probably recognizable when compared to his younger self,

but likely looked considerably different.

She also caught sight of some girls swooning over this dashing black-haired young man standing before them, which put her in a somewhat unamused mood.

“Claudio.” A subdued yet clear voice resounded. Rosemarie turned around along with Claudio and the others. She hurried to take a knee before King Baltzar, the man unperturbed by what just transpired before him. Beside her, Claudio stood.

“I am terribly sorry for the commotion, Your Majesty. Also, I apologize for speaking of the details of the Forbidden Forest before everyone in attendance. I assure you it was done in the interest of preventing anyone else like Kastner from doing the same...”

“That matters not. If you believe you’ve incited a commotion, then be sure to improve upon your actions in the future. You are plenty capable of doing so, I am sure.” Those were the king’s only remarks, made with a stern expression, as he vacated the throne and left with the chamberlain.

“Prince Claudio...” Their exchange was so extremely curt that it was hard to believe they were father and son. It was an interaction that made Rosemarie’s brows droop, discouraged, but Claudio smiled at her as if nothing happened.

“Now, then, a hefty clean-up process awaits. We have exposed all of Kastner’s wrongdoings, after all. It’s about time that I drag all of his conspirators out to the public. However, before I do that...” Claudio’s tone was intentionally bright and cheery to Rosemarie, her mind still not clear. He then softly held her bruised hands.

“You did a good job coming back here. When I heard you had been abandoned in the Forbidden Forest, I was beside myself with concern.”

“I have you to thank for that, Prince Claudio. Master Edel told me I was able to come out safe because I had your mana in me.” There was no stopping her from feeling guilty for stealing his mana in the first place, but that was the one instance in which she was grateful that she had it.

“So, you were able to see Master Edel. That is what brought that deed into fruition, I see...”

“That deed...?” Rosemarie cocked her head in confusion and Claudio stared at her straight in the eyes. More accurately, straight in the lips. The sensation of Claudio’s slightly dry, yet unexpectedly soft, lips came rushing back into her memory, and the blood shot to her head.

“That was...! Um! Master Edel told me to test that in exchange for sending me to you, Prince Claudio, you see, and...” Now that she thought of it, she ended up kissing Claudio with a packed audience.

From an unrelated bystander's perspective, she looked like a loon of a princess devoid of common sense with no regard for the public eye.

(Bucket! I need my bucket!)

Since she still had Claudio holding on to both of her hands, she couldn't use them to cover her face. Instead, she dug it into her arms, shivering bashfully.

"You're blushing up a storm."

"...Your ears are just as red, Prince Claudio," she pointed out in response to his teasing remark.

"—Shut up. Not another word." He retaliated by pinching her nose instead of her cheek this time around.

"Your Royal Highness."

Rosemarie froze up before she could even turn around upon hearing the addressing voice. It was a familiar deep voice, one belonging to the wolf-headed captain of The Second Order.

"I will be right there." She herself had not been cleared of being suspected of assassinating the prince. She didn't want to think that her returning like this had added to her charges, but she had no idea what would happen.

Claudio furrowed his brows and whispered to her.

"Rosemarie, you remember what I told you, right?"

"No matter what happens, don't admit to the crime. I will have you cleared in no time. So, just have faith and wait." She was confident that she recited each line without error. Claudio looked dumbfounded for a second, probably being caught off-guard by that. He then quickly averted his gaze, seemingly embarrassed.

"I will be waiting for you."

"Good."

Rosemarie bashfully smiled at Claudio, who gave a firm nod in reply with his head still facing away.

Epilogue

A sweet aroma hung in the air of the room.

In the dining hall, a piping hot brown drink was served on the table easily capable of seating dozens of people. Everyone in attendance furrowed their brows and what had been presented to them.

And this is?" one of the magistrates asked. The main type of teas in Baltzar were tinged red with a clear and refreshing citrusy aroma. They had probably never seen a tea with such a sugary-sweet aroma in a shade so dark that you couldn't see the bottom of the cup.

(Just remember; if this concludes without a hitch, you can hole up in my greenhouse with your bucket over your head...)

Rosemarie stood in the corner of the dining hall, positively frozen in anxiety. She was sandwiched between two knights of The Second Order at both sides, so it made it even worse.

"It is called 'Kaola.' They drink it regularly in Volland, and it is said to have fatigue-curing properties. However, it is apparently difficult to manufacture, and banned from export into outside countries." Everyone who was listening with an earnest gaze at Claudio's explanation, as he sat at the edge of the long table, were people who gathered to judge Rosemarie.

In the midst of Kastner's overly long list of crimes coming to light one after another, today marked the third day since the inquiry. And maybe because everyone wanted to square things away quickly, Rosemarie's charges were being judged.

"Do you mean to tell us that this girl brought an item banned from export into our country?" The badger-headed magistrate cast a judging pair of eyes upon Rosemarie, making her twitch her shoulders in surprise. Claudio then intervened.

"Listen to me closely. I said that it was difficult to manufacture. I've been told that since it's becoming a scarce commodity, so it's only consumed within Volland. A small enough quantity that they don't allow distribution to outside nations. King Volland has been sending over a supply for his daughter who loves drinking it."

Claudio shot a glance at the magistrate that practically asked, "Do you have a problem with that, good sir?" It was a glance that made the man hush up, feeling awkward.

"Putting that aside, Doctor? When you were summoned to the princess's room, was this aroma not drifting through the air? I assume

you remember since it's a very specific aroma."

The middle-aged doctor who sat opposite to Claudio closed his eyes in recollection. "—Well... Hmm, yes... I do indeed remember this sweet aroma. I also remember the brown liquid spilled atop the desk. Hence why I thought you drank something and passed out as a result..."

"You mistook that for poison?"

"Yes, sir." The doctor gave a firm nod with tensed brows and Claudio nodded back. He then held out his hand to his audience, persuasively.

"You heard it for yourselves. That day, I went out on my survey. I simply drank the Kaola and fell asleep, most likely because of my fatigue over the course of several days. The princess just jumped to conclusions and summoned the doctor. —If you doubt this, I implore you all to drink the Kaola sitting before you."

Silence befell the room. Everyone looked down at the Kaola, not budging a muscle.

(That's right. It might be poisoned, so there's no way they would drink it.)

They verified that, with the processing that Edeltraud put the Kaola through, it barely had any magic-stealing effects left. So even if there was someone who had mana here, there was no risk of it being stolen. Regardless, Rosemarie was still getting nervous.

Rosemarie made up her mind and inhaled.

"I will drink it."

As soon as she said that, Rosemarie walked over to the doctor, who was sitting the closest to her, took the cup, and put it against her lips.

The unique bitterness and slight acidity spread throughout her mouth, leaving a sour aftertaste. A smile naturally drew itself across her face, and upon noticing that everyone was still staring at her, she quickly straightened that smile out.

"The princess seems to be fine after drinking it." Amidst the stifling silence, the sound of cups clanging off their plates could be heard.

The Second Order's captain set his sights on her as he sat near the doctor. His face was human, but he was most certainly the wolf-headed knight who took Rosemarie into custody. He slowly lifted up the cup, without a single shift in his brows, putting the cup to his lips, and drinking it down like it were nothing.

"—It has a unique taste. However... I can see myself getting a tad hooked." The knight's lips curled into a faint smile. Rosemarie was pleased on the inside.

(Yes! You get hooked!)

She was trying hard to keep her face neutral, but it seemed to be slipping a little bit. She felt that Claudio was glaring at her from afar, so she once again straightened herself out.

The others timidly put their cups to their lips, convinced after the knight drank the tea with no issues. While there were some that were firm in their refusal to pick the cups up, that hadn't broken any expectations.

There were some that winced upon sampling the tea, and some that liked it enough to down the entire cup, but the general impression that started to roll out was positive.

Claudio cleared his throat to draw everyone's attention.

“—So, gentlemen. What of the princess's charges now?”

Her vision was clouded by darkness.

Even with her eyes opened, the area was dimly lit. It was a sight that filled Rosemarie with an earnest sense of relief. The scent of the out-of-season roses tickled her nostrils, but the sweet scent of the Kaola tea tickled them more.

“Princess, shall we return to your room? Nightfall is already upon us. Come now, I have some piping hot Kaola all ready for you, as well.” Heidi brought the cup filled with Kaola over to Rosemarie, but she remained hanging her head, bucket on head, in the corner of the greenhouse.

“I'm sorry, Heidi. Just a little while longer.” That same afternoon, a verdict was passed on Rosemarie's charges.

—She was acquitted of the charges of plotting Crown Prince Claudio's assassination, but she was to be placed under surveillance.

Everyone probably knew that she was actually innocent of any crime considering that Claudio, the victim in question, was the one defending her. It did mean a fair end to the matter, nevertheless.

Not only was a letter with a detailed report on the incident issued to Volland, but an apology signed by both King Baltzar and Claudio as well.

Her relief was short-lived as Rosemarie bolted out of the dining hall, her legs taking her to the greenhouse Claudio gave to her, where she put her bucket squarely on her head. The continued exposure to the gazes of both human and beast alike was bringing her to the edge of her mental limits.

(Why haven't my eyes been cured even though Prince Claudio's mana has returned to him...?)

Perhaps her eyes would remain this way for the rest of her days.

As she let out a deep sigh, her bucket was plucked off her head from behind.

“—! Heidi, please, give that ba...”

“You’re back to wearing this thing on your head? Doesn’t it get hot?”

When she turned around in chase for her pilfered bucket, she found Claudio with it in his hands, looking disappointed.

“No, it doesn’t. I won’t wear it, so please give it back,” she pleaded with her hand extended. Claudio looked back at her sternly, but he returned the bucket to her without objections, nonetheless. Rosemarie hugged it with care, settling her shaky nerves.

“—I hate the fact that an inanimate object has me jealous.”

“...Huh? Did you say something?” Rosemarie tilted her head, perplexed. Claudio blushed slightly, shook his head to disavow having said anything, and presented his hand.

“Let’s go back to your room. I’m sure you’re tired.” She went to take his hand, hesitated, and then gave a dry smile.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I was just thinking about how differently you treat me compared to the time just after the wedding...”

“Yes, as for that... I’m sorry. I feel absolutely terrible for leaving you behind in the hall.”

“Well, I’m also to blame for that happening... But, I was so happy that you came to get me when Master Edel tricked us.”

“Right, as bitter as I am about that, it ultimately worked out.”

“Still, I let you go ahead and drink Kaola without knowing it was made from Seed of Mana-Sealing.”

“You did. I thought I was a dead man because of that.”

“I’m so sorry. And despite that, you’ve given me this greenhouse and taken care of so much for me... I’ve been quite an inconvenience to you from the very start, haven’t I?”

“...No. I mean, that’s beside the point. Anyway, what is with this sudden trip down memory lane?”

She smiled at Claudio as he looked at her, dubious. Despite her remembering all the drama she shared with Claudio, one event after another, she found herself getting sentimental.

Claudio’s unsociable temperament had all but faded and she could tell that he was clearly genuine about caring for her just as he had stated. That was also why it was a tad saddening.

“—When will you be sending me back to Volland?”

Claudio gazed, perplexed, dropping his outstretched hand. “What are you talking about? Your charges have been dropped.”

“Yes, but, I believe the agreement was that I stay here until your mana returned to you, Prince Claudio.” Her own eyes hadn’t been cured, but there was no longer a reason for her to stay here if his mana was back to him.

“Since your face has returned back to normal, there are girls who would gladly marry you, seeing as how handsome and refined you are, Prince Claudio. A no-frills, gloomy backwoods princess such as myself being crown princess would be a disservice to the people of Baltzar.” With his head back to normal, Claudio was a talented and personable young man. Luck was in his favor, no matter what. Although, now that his attitude had finally started to soften, she was enjoying the conversations they were sharing.

She pretended not to notice the aching in her heart, staring at Claudio.

Claudio didn't say a word, his face stern. Maybe he wasn't because he was going to say something? There was a possibility that she got the jump on him and he was angry.

“Oh, but, if our divorce doesn't happen right away, I will be fine with a year wait. You can just leave me be in a corner of the castle until then. Also, if you just allow me to walk to the greenhouse, I can —”

“Princess! Princess! Hush up! Shut your mouth!” Heidi, pale in the face for some reason, covered Rosemarie's mouth with her hand from the side. At almost the same time, Claudio bounced his shoulders with a chuckle.

“Send you back to Volland? I never planned on doing that at all.” Claudio stated with an emotionless voice and a somewhat cold smile. Rosemarie shook off Heidi's hand, miffed.

“That isn't what we agreed to! You said that you would send me back home if your mana returned...” Was Claudio telling her to watch on as a different girl stood by his side? She didn't want to see that, and just imagining that choked her. Even if she were to keep herself shut in, she couldn't keep herself from imagining. In which case, it would have been better for her to worry about it back in Volland.

Rosemarie stared at Claudio without wiping the tears welling in her eyes. He clearly seemed shaken up.

“You... said that you would be by my side if I needed you. Was that a lie?”

“It was not a lie. But you don't need me anymore, right?”

“As if I could do that. Do you think I'm the type of man who would kick you out because you're useless after getting my mana back... No, I did say something similar, didn't I? Back in the beginning, at least.” Claudio started arguing his point angrily, but he touched his forehead as if he suddenly realized.



“Um, I don’t mind. It isn’t anything that you should worry yourself about. I assure you, don’t bother yourself...”

“If you don’t think it bothers me, you’re crazy!” Claudio spun his wheels in place, pondering as though fighting an inner conflict, and then snapped his head up and looked at Rosemarie straight in the eyes. Her attention was fixed to Claudio’s pair of intense blue eyes.

“—I don’t *need* a woman that won’t embarrass me, the so-called handsome and personable individual. That sort of woman would bore me. In fact, I would enjoy spending my time with a certain crybaby, scaredy-cat, with a habit of holing up with a bucket over their head and impulsive behavior—namely, you.” Claudio slowly held out his hand once again.

“Also, your eyes haven’t healed up yet, right? Why don’t you let *me* heal *you* this time around?”

Rosemarie fixed her eyes on the hand held out in front of her. Was it okay for her to take the hand offered to her? Was she going to be a nuisance for Claudio? In one way she was happy that he was keeping her around, but she was at a loss as to what she should do.

“Rosemarie, stay by my side. No, *please* stay by my side.” Claudio called her by name plaintively, making her chest tighten. It didn’t matter to her whether that was what he truly felt or not. Noticing that part of her wanted to believe Claudio, she finally made up her mind.

“Prince Claudio, I...” Rosemarie suddenly stopped mid-thought. Behind Claudio, she doubted her own eyes as she saw the reflection in the greenhouse glass acting as a mirror in the setting sun.

(No... it can’t be...)

Rosemarie stood with her eyes wide and Heidi watched the whole thing unfold in panic. Claudio’s head was in human form—or so she thought.

Claudio’s hair had turned silver. Rosemarie ended up grabbing his collar instead of his hand.

“Your face is returning back to how it was!”

“What was that? Hey, you, maid. What does my face look like right now?!” Taken aback, Claudio turned to Heidi. Perhaps startled by the shouting, Alto, who was apparently waiting outside the greenhouse, came rushing in.

“Um, well, your hair is silver and your skin is covered by silver fur.”

“And you, Alto?”

“Sir, I see the same thing as the good maid.” The unfortunate look in Alto’s eyes made Claudio thrust a hand past his bangs and click his tongue with a sour expression.

“Guess there was no way it would come back that easy...”

Rosemarie was about to say something to the despondent Claudio,

but she suddenly crossed eyes with him. Both of their faces instantly flushed up and they turned to face away each other in an instant.

“I’d appreciate it if you forgot what I said earlier.”

“Very well. I will pretend you never said it.” Having come back to their senses, that seriousness was extremely embarrassing. Not only that, but she completely forgot that Heidi had been watching them the whole time.

“...Let’s go back. We’re going to have to find another way to get back my mana starting tomorrow.” Claudio held out his hand. His wryly smiling face was still a bit red. Rosemarie put her hand atop his, suppressing her shame.

She admittedly felt just a little guilty at how happy she was to have a reason to stay by Claudio’s side for now.

Walking through the door that Alto and Heidi opened for them, Rosemarie looked up at Claudio, who suddenly seemed worn out.

“Are you tired?”

“Exhausted.”

“—Well, in that case...”

“In that case, we can make do without my head in your lap, yes.” Rosemarie shot him a glare, a tad disappointed at his response. She then forced out a smile, swinging the bucket in her other hand all the while.

Afterword

Hello there. To the new people, nice to meet you; and to long-time readers, nice to meet you again. It's me, Eri Shiduki.

Thank you very much for picking up this book out of the thousands of other books out there.

Ever since my debut work, I've kept up the tradition of a one-page afterword, so this time we're going for two! Now then, despite not really knowing what I should be writing about here, I guess we'll talk about the title a bit.

The title, *Apparently It's My Fault That My Husband Has the Head of a Beast*, was initially planned to be the subtitle instead.

I always struggle with the title each and every time and, sure enough, this time was no exception.

I tried my best not to tack on a subtitle as much as possible, but I didn't come up with any ideas and planned on splitting it into a main title and subtitle like always. And out of the many proposed subtitles that I would put under the main title ("Whatever & Something" or "Something of the Whatever," etc...), my boss suggested that I make the subtitle the main title instead and the rest is history.

This turned out being my first work without a subtitle, but it's long. Also, it doesn't leave much to the imagination. Not sure if that makes it harder to remember or easier, to be honest...

Also, I was worried if this long title would even fit on the cover of the book, but they managed to get it nice and neat on there, which was honestly a huge relief.

Speaking of the cover, a big thanks to Kasumi Nagi-sensei for drawing the gorgeous illustration! Since this was the first time I've had my protagonist in a dress, I was overwhelmed by its splendor. She even drew in the bucket as a prop, and when I found it, I was grinning from ear to ear. The contrast of the troubled-looking heroine and the beast-headed prince was so fitting that I was really entranced.

Then, there's my boss. I barely made it again, so I'm sorry for putting you through so much trouble. And I have to thank all the people who helped in managing to bring this book to print.

Finally, I need to thank you, the reader. I'm really hoping that you enjoyed this little tale of a shut-in princess and a slightly tsundere beast-headed prince.

Okay, that's it. Here is hoping that I get to see you all again in the next installment!



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Apparently it's My Fault That My Husband Has The Head of a
Beast: Volume 1

by Eri Shiduki

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